VISION HOUSE

By

C. N. *and* A. M. WILLIAMSON

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AUTHOR OF "THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR," "THE GOLDEN SILENCE," "EVERYMAN'S LAND," ETC.

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CHAPTER I

ENTER MISS SOREL

IT was the third day out from Liverpool on the way to New York, and people were just beginning to take an interest in each other's names and looks.

The passenger list of the *Britannia* was posted up close to the lift on B deck, but the weather had not encouraged curious groups to study and inwardly digest its items. In fact, digestion of all sorts had been difficult. To-day, however, the huge ship had ceased to step on and stumble over monster waves, and had slipped into a sea of silken blue. Bad sailors and lazy ones were on deck staring at their fellows as at unearthly creatures who had dropped on board since the vessel sailed, miraculously like manna from heaven. The news had flown round, as news flies in an Eastern bazaar, that there were three names of conspicuous interest on the hitherto neglected list, and that now was the moment for "spotting" their owners.

Two of these should be easy to find, for their steamer chairs, plainly labelled, stood side by side on A deck, where everyone sat or was supposed to sit. The sea dogs and dogesses who braved all weathers had nosed out those labels, but had so far watched in vain for the

chairs to be occupied. They had observed, also, that corresponding places at the captain's table were vacant. There were three chairs together on deck, and in the dining-saloon, but the third did not count with the public. It was that of a mere chaperon—The Girl's mother. She was not the third of the Three Thrilling Passengers. That person happened to be a man, and he had neither chair nor label. If he had eaten a meal outside his cabin he had somehow passed unrecognised.

The stewards, questioned, said that John Garth had not applied for a seat at table. Yes, certainly, one had been assigned to him, next Mrs. Sorel, she being in the place of honour on the right of the *Britannia's* captain. In this position Garth would have faced Lord Severance, and sat diagonally opposite Miss Sorel, who was on the captain's left. But the favoured man had ignored his privilege. It was understood that he preferred snatching vague sandwiches and glasses of beer at odd hours in the smoking-room, or on deck; therefore it would be hard to identify him. Meanwhile, however, celebrity seekers gathered near those three chairs on the sunny port side of A deck.

By ten o'clock the crowd had thickened; but it was not till close on eleven that a tall figure in uniform, preceded by a steward with rugs, sat down in the chair ticketed "Major the Earl of Severance."

Many Americans were on board, homeward bound after months of Red Cross and other war work, and they knew in their hearts, no doubt, that titles, once valued by snobs, were absolutely out-of-date in this newly-democratised world. Nevertheless, they threw glances at Lord Severance. Their glances would not have been wasted on a mere every-day male. Of course, their excuse might have been that they'd prefer glanc-

ing at their own American Johnny Garth, who was as much a major as Lord Severance, and, being a V.C. (the one and only American V.C.), twice as much a man for them.

But then Garth wasn't in sight, and Severance was. Besides, the chair between Lord Severance's and Mrs. Sorel's was ticketed "Miss Marise Sorel." Nobody could deny that Miss Sorel was worth flocking to gaze at, had Severance not existed.

Thousands, hundred of thousands, of men and women paid good money to gaze at her in theatres. Here she could be seen free of charge. But was she coming out? the deck pilgrims wondered. And Lord Severance had an air of wondering, too. He held a book in his hand; but his eyes were often on the nearest door.

They were strikingly fine eyes, and Lord Severance was in appearance a striking man. "Stunning" was an adjective used by some American promenaders. They remarked, too, that he "wasn't a typical Englishman. You'd think he was Spanish or something."

He was not Spanish, but half of him was not English; the "something" was Greek. His mother had been a Greek heiress and beauty, but her money and looks had been lost before she died. Most valuable things were lost after they had been in the Severance family for any length of time. The beautiful Greek woman's handsome son had pale olive skin, a straight nose, full red lips under a miniature moustache like two inked finger-prints, raven hair sleekly brushed straight back from his square forehead, and immense eyes of unfathomable blackness.

He was going to "the States" on some military mission, no one knew quite what, and so, although the war had finished months ago, he was still in uniform,

with the "brass hat" of a staff officer, and the gorgeous grey-lavender overcoat of the Guards. It seemed as if nobody could help admiring him, and nobody did help it, except a great, hulking chap in abominable clothes, with a khaki-coloured handkerchief round his neck instead of a collar. This beast—in a sat-on-looking cap, enough to disgrace a commercial traveller, sleeves as much too short for his red-brown wrists as were the trousers for his strapping ankles—strode to and fro along the deck as if for a wager. It was almost as if he flaunted himself in defiance of someone or something. Yet he didn't appear self-conscious. He had in his yellow-grey eyes that bored-with-humanity look of a lion in a zoo, who gazes past crowds to the one vision he desires—the desert. Only, now and then as he passed the chair of Lord Severance, his look came back for an instant from the desert, or waste of waves, to shoot scorn at a pair of well-shod feet crossed on a black fur rug. This would hardly indicate any emotion higher than jealousy, it seemed, as the boots of Major Lord Severance were perfect, and his own were vile.

When Severance had restlessly occupied his chair for fifteen minutes he suddenly sprang up. A maid, unmistakably French, was squeezing a load of rugs through a doorway. Severance ignored the offered service of a deck steward, as if the rugs were too sacred for human hands to touch. With a kind smile he himself helped the woman in black to spread the soft, furry folds over the two neighbouring chairs.

"It's like a scene on the stage in a play written for her," said one American Red Cross nurse to another. "The hero of the piece and the maid working up the woman star's entrance."

"Which is he, more like hero or villain?" the second

nurse reflected aloud. "If I wrote him into a play, he'd be the villain—that dark type with red lips and a little black moustache. But the Sorel's a star all right. We ought to tune up and whistle a bar of entrance music! See how the French maid puts the brown rug on one chair and the blue rugs on the other. What'll you bet Sorel and her mother aren't dressed one in blue and one in brown? Gee! The biggest blue rug's lined with chinchilla. Can you beat it?"

Neither nurse could beat it, but the approaching vision could. She beat it with a long cloak of even more silvery chinchilla.

At the door she stood aside for an older, shorter, plumper woman to pass, she herself being very tall and exquisitely slender. She did not seem to look at anyone, or be aware that anyone looked at her. Nevertheless, all eyes were focussed upon the standing figure in the chinchilla coat and blue toque while the lady in brown and sables was being seated. Even Lord Severance had eyes only for the girl as he lent his hands to her maid to tuck in the brown rugs. But the girl's smile was for her mother, and it was not till Mrs. Sorel was settled that she moved. A charming little scene of daughterly devotion, worthy a paragraph if there were a journalist in sight!

Just as Severance, with an air of absorption, wrapped Miss Sorel's grey suède shoes in her chinchilla-lined rug, the giant in the ghastly clothes hurled himself past. The girl did not lift her lashes, so famous for their length and curl. She was hanging a gold-mesh bag on the arm of her chair. You would say that she had not noticed the fellow. But the fellow had noticed her.

The distant-desert look died. In his eyes a flame lit,

and flashed at the girl in the chair. It was a light that literally spoke. It said "God! You're a beauty." Then he flung one of his glances at Severance, scornful or jealous as before. To do this he had not actually paused, yet it was as if something had happened. Whatever the thing was, Severance resented it in hot silence; and, in turn, his eyes did deadly work. They stabbed the broad back of the badly-cut, badly-fitting coat as its wearer forged away, hands deep in pockets.

Miss Sorel sat between her mother and Lord Severance. She glanced at the former as if to begin a conversation, but Mrs. Sorel had opened her lorgnettes and a novel. The girl knew the signal: "Don't talk to me. Talk to him." But she was lazy in obeying. She felt so sure of Severance, that she needn't try to hold him by any tricks. She might now treat him as she chose. Not that she had ever let him see that she was anxious to please. But there *had* been an anxious time. The girl didn't want to talk, so she sat deliciously still, deliciously happy. She was thinking. The restful peace of the sea after stormy days made her think of herself.

She often thought of herself; more, indeed, than of any other subject, because, like most beautiful young actresses, she had been encouraged to form the habit. But this was special—extra special.

The girl was so content with her world that she shut herself in with it by shutting her eyes. Then she faintly smiled in order that (just in case they happened to look) people shouldn't suppose she was seasick.

How odd that it should be her mother's lorgnettes which had reminded her suddenly of her own good luck —the lorgnettes, and the delicate ringed fingers grasping the tortoiseshell handle!

Once that little hand had not been so white. There

had been no leisure for manicuring nails, and polishing them to the sheen of pink coral. There had been no rings—no lorgnettes monogramed with rose diamonds. That was before the "Marise" days; before clever Mums had linked together in the French way her daughter's name of Mary Louise (after father and mother) and begun training the girl into superlative beauty and grace for the stage. Oh yes, Marise owed a lot to ambitious little Mums! But at last she had been able to make generous payment for all the trouble, all the sacrifices. She, Marise, had bought the lorgnettes, and the sables, and the antique rings which Mums told everyone were heirlooms in the Sorel family, bequeathed to a great-grandfather of "poor dear Louis by a Countess Sorel beheaded in the Revolution." She, Marise, had easily earned money for all the other lovely things they both possessed.

It was like a dream to remember how, three years ago, she had been just a pretty "actorine" among other "actorines" in New York, struggling for a chance to "show what she could really do," her heart jumping like a fish at the sight of a Big Manager. Why, hadn't she literally squeaked with joy when she got a contract for "fifty per"? And hadn't she soon after nearly fallen dead when Dunstan Belloc let her understudy Elsa Fortescue in "The Spring Song"?

Of course, even at that time, she and Mums had both been sure she was born to play "Dolores," and that Elsa *wasn't*. Belloc hadn't been so sure. He had given her the part only because she looked irresistible when she begged for it. Oh, and perhaps a little because her dead father, Louis Sorel, had been an old friend of his. Marise had had to "make good," and she had made good.

Not that the girl had wished harm to Elsa Fortescue. But Elsa was a "Has Been," whereas "Dolores" was supposed to be in the springtime of youth, and possessed of an annihilating beauty—the beauty which draws men as the moon draws the sea. Marise didn't think it conceited to face facts, and admit that this description fitted her like a glove. These gifts had brought her sensational success in a single night, whereas the piece had simply "flivvered" with Elsa as star. The critics had been cold if not cruel, and grief mixed with *grippe* laid Elsa low. Then little Marise Sorel (only figuratively "little," she being one of those willowy, long-limbed nymphs who are the models and manikins of the moment), "little Marise," in whom author and manager felt scant faith, had saved the play and made herself. Both had boomed for a wonderful year, and at the end of that time England had called for "Dolores" and "The Song."

Oh, and those two years in London that followed! Never could another girl have known anything like them since the days of the great professional beauties whom crowds had mobbed in Hyde Park. Papers and people had praised Miss Sorel's looks, her voice, and her talent. It was thought quite amazing that a girl so lovely should take the trouble to act well, but Marise explained to interviewers that she couldn't help acting. It was in her blood to act—her father's blood. She didn't add that ambition was in her mother's blood, and that Mums was doing all she could to hand it on to the next generation. It wasn't necessary to mention ambition to the public. Some people considered ambition more a vice than a virtue. But Marise, who knew what poor Mums's past had been, understood the passion and even felt the thrill of it. Not only had she

had the "time of her life" in those two years, but she had met people whom she couldn't have approached before her blossoming as "Dolores" in "The Spring Song." As "Dolores" she had been spoiled, fêted, adored; and she had become rich.

Now, here she was on the way back to dear New York to revive the play, which Belloc, as manager, and Sheridan, as author, expected to surpass its first success. At present Miss Sorel had the valued cachet of a London triumph added to her charms. She was more *chic,* she could act and sing better, than before. Isadora Duncan had coached her for the dance in the last scene, as an act of generous friendship, and this had given "The Song" a new fillip in London. It would be the same in New York.

As if this were not enough to satisfy an older "star" than she, there was the wonderful way in which the affair of Tony Severance had developed. He had strained every nerve to sail with her on the *Britannia.* Heaven alone knew how he'd obtained or invented the "mission" which had made his plan possible. It was entirely for her sake, and everyone was coupling their names—in a nice, proper way, of course. She was that kind of girl. And Mums was that kind of mother. Even before Severance had come into the title, he had been splendidly worth while on account of his looks, his position, and his "set," but now it seemed to Marise that every unmarried woman in England and America must be envying her.

As she sipped the honey of these thoughts, the girl felt that Severance was staring at her eyelashes, and willing her to lift them. But she would not, just yet. She went on with her thinking. She asked herself if her feeling for him were love? Of course, it wasn't the

"Dolores" sort of love for "David Hardcastle," but love like that was safer on the stage than off. Marise admired Tony, and was very proud of her conquest, though she would admit that to no one except Mums. She had been horribly afraid, humiliatingly afraid for a few days, that he might change his mind if not his heart, when the earldom fell into his hands like a prize-package. If she'd not been sure before that Tony was the one man for her, she was frantically sure after the great surprise, when he was safely on board the *Britannia.* How pleased the cats would have been if she'd lost him—the cats who pretended to think, in the days before he was Lord Severance, that the honesty of his intentions depended upon her money.

They would see now—hateful, jealous things! For, as the Earl of Severance, though not rich, Tony would be no longer poor, and he had proved by sailing with her that life without Marise Sorel was worthless to him.

The cats would be sorry when she was the Countess of Severance, for every nasty word they'd said. She would forgive, but she would never be nice to them, of course. She would ask the creatures only to big, dull parties, just to let them see what a *grande dame* little Marise had become. And even if she weren't certain that she'd rather be a Countess than a stage star, Mums was certain for her—poor Mums, who had always yearned to be at the top! And it would really be nice to "belong" among the great people who had played with her for a while and made her their pet.

Marise opened her eyes. She did not, however, turn them to Severance. She gazed at the one ring which adorned her left hand. She never wore more than one ring at a time. This, and having all her jewels match each other, her dress and her mood, was a fad of hers.

Celine helped her carry it out. But if Severance gave her a diamond, that would match nothing, and spoil the scheme.

"You have the longest lashes of any woman in the world," he remarked.

"One would think you'd seen them all—all the women and all the eyelashes!" She looked at him at last, and her soft, smoke-blue eyes were the colour of her sapphire brooch and chain.

"I've seen my share of fair ladies."

"So I've heard."

"You've probably heard a good deal that isn't true." Severance glanced at Mrs. Sorel, or at what he could see of her, which was mostly book, lorgnettes, and hand. She seemed absorbed. He leaned towards Marise.

"The last three days have been a hundred years long," he murmured.

"Why? Have you been seasick, poor boy?"

"No!" (This was a slight deviation from the truth.) "I've been beastly dull without you."

"If you're such a good sailor, couldn't you walk, and read, and——"

"I couldn't be bothered doing anything intelligent. I moped in my cabin." ("Moped" was one word for what he had done.) "I——"

"Oh, here comes Samson again!" Marise broke in. "Isn't that absolutely the name for him? It jumped into my head when he passed before and gave me that wild sort of look—did you notice?"

"I did," said Severance drily. "I thought you didn't. Your eyes were apparently glued to your gold bag."

"What's the good of being an actress if you can't see two things at once, especially if one of them's the biggest thing on the ship? Nobody could help noticing

that—any more than if Mont Blanc suddenly waltzed down stage from off the back drop."

"Waltzed? 'Galumped' is the word in this case."

"Oh, do you think so?" Marise appealed. "He walks like a man used to wide, free spaces."

"Like a farmer, you mean. To my mind, that's his part: Hodge—not Samson."

"I've forgotten what Samson was, I'm ashamed to say, before he played opposite Delilah," confessed Marise. "I suppose he was a warrior—most men were in those days—as now. This might be one—if it weren't for the clothes. They certainly are the limit! But do you know, he could be very distinguished-looking, even handsome, decently turned out?"

"No, I don't know it, my child." Severance beat down his irritation. "The only way I can picture that ugly blighter being decently 'turned out,' is out of a respectable club."

"You talk as if you had a grudge against my provincial Samson," laughed Marise, whose blue eyes had followed the "blighter" along the deck to the point of disappearance.

"I don't want to talk about him at all," protested Severance. "I want to talk about you."

"We're always talking about me!" smiled Marise, who was honestly not aware how she enjoyed talking about herself, or how soon she tired of most other subjects. "If you won't talk of one man, let's talk of another! For instance, have you seen our V.C. passenger?"

Severance flushed slightly. "Didn't I tell you, angel girl, that I've been in my cabin the whole time?"

"You didn't say the 'whole' time. And anyhow, there's such a crowd on board, they might have stuck a

fellow-soldier in with you at the last moment. Didn't they warn you that they couldn't promise a cabin to yourself? Naturally they'd have chosen a V.C. as the least insupportable person."

"Several V.C.'s I've met have been most insupportable persons," grumbled Severance.

Something in his tone made the girl suddenly face him with wide-open eyes. She saw the dusky stain of red under the olive skin, and the drawing down of the black brows. "Why, Tony, how stupid of me not to remember before!" she exclaimed.

There! It had come—the thing that was bound to come sooner or later. Severance, rawly sensitive on this subject which the girl refused to drop, had wanted it to be later.

For the first time he thought that Marise Sorel was more obstinate than a beautiful young woman ought to be. In a man he would call such persistence mulish.

CHAPTER II

EXIT THE BLIGHTER

STUPID not to remember what?" Severance still temporised, though he knew the answer.

"Not to remember that man named Garth, in your regiment, who was promoted from a private to be an officer, and won the V.C. I think it was Mums who asked you about him one day, when she'd read something in the *Daily Mail,* and you said he was a cad. Is this by any chance the same Garth?"

"By evil chance, it is."

Marise was interested. She was dramatic, and liked coincidences. Mrs. Sorel was interested too, with that part of her mind—the principal part—which was not reading Wells's *Joan and Peter.* It was quite easy, for two reasons, to unhook her attention from the book. One reason was that as a chaperon she was reading by discretion, not inclination. The other reason was, if she had to read at all, she would secretly have preferred a "smart society" novel. But when she read in public she always selected a book which could be talked about intellectually.

She knew how strong this feeling of Lord Severance against the regimental hero had been, and she wished that Marise would show a little tact, and not vex him. He had not proposed yet!

But Marise went on. "How quaint that your Major Garth should be on board our ship!"

"For Heaven's sake, don't call him my Major Garth, dear girl! I loathe the brute."

"But why, old thing? You might tell me why."

"I did, at the time your mother mentioned him."

"If you did, I've forgotten. Do tell me again. It sounds exciting."

Mary Sorel thought that intervention would now be more useful than detachment.

"You two are talking so loudly, I can't read!" she sweetly reproved the pair. "I caught the name of Garth, and the whole conversation we had that day, about him, came back to me. We were lunching with Lord Severance at the Carlton, and I showed him a paragraph I'd clipped from the *Daily Mail.* I thought as it was about his regiment he might be interested if he hadn't seen it. It was headed 'Romantic Career of a Hero. British-born American Wins the Victoria Cross.' But he wasn't interested, because he explained that the man was a blot on the Brigade; very common, not a gentleman."

"Yes, it comes back to me, too," said Marise. "But if he was a hero——"

"That's all newspaper tosh!" cut in Severance. "They must have headings! It's luck more than heroism that gets a chap the Victoria Cross. Soldiers all know that. Otherwise——"

His lips said no more. Only his eyes were eloquent. The beautiful lavender-grey overcoat hid no ribbon-symbols of decorations on his breast. But how can a staff officer find the chance his soul yearns for, to show his mettle—except the metal on his expensive "brass hat"?

"Of course!" Mrs. Sorel breathed sympathetically.

"Garth was all right as a private, I dare say,"

Severance grudged. "Even as an officer he might have passed in some regiments. But not in the Guards. He ought never to have been let come in. And he ought certainly not to have stayed in, knowing how we felt. If he'd had any proper pride, he wouldn't have stopped a day."

"Perhaps it was pride made him stick," suggested Marise, led on somehow she hardly knew why—to defend the culprit.

" 'Proper' pride was my word," Severance reminded her.

"Extraordinary that an American should be serving with the Guards, in the first place!" Mary Sorel flung herself into the breach, hoping to stop the argument. Arguments made her anxious. She thought that they led to quarrels. And not for anything on earth would she have Marise quarrel with Severance, the only earl who had ever shown symptoms of proposing. It had been well enough for the girl to pique him when he was a handsome young man about town, whose good position was counterbalanced by the star's financial and face value. But since six weeks Severance had become a great catch. Other girls were digging bait in case the fish should wriggle, or be coaxed, off Marise Sorel's hook.

"The fellow's luck again!" growled Severance. "I don't know what his job was in his own country. I don't interest myself in the private life of the lower classes. All I know is, he wasn't a soldier; but he had some bee in his bonnet about a future war, and a theory that there'd be trench fighting on a big scale. He contrived to invent and patent a motor entrenching tool, supposed to act fifty times quicker than anything else ever seen. Then he proceeded to experiment on his

back-woods farm, or his wild west ranch, or whatever it was. Washington wasn't 'taking any,' however (isn't that what you say in the States?), so Garth decided to try it on the British bulldog. Where his big stroke of luck came in was meeting our old C.O. on board ship crossing to England. The Colonel had been in New York with his American wife. He probably heard the blighter brag of his invention, and that would catch him as toasted cheese in a trap catches a hungry rat. You see, the old boy always had a craze of his own about trench warfare, and I believe he used to bore the W.O. stiff, roaring for some such machine as this chap Garth invented. Naturally, Pobbles (that's what we call the C.O. behind his back)—Lord Pobblebrook, you know—took the man up. Not socially, of course. Garth's about on a social level with Lady Pobblebrook's footman, I should think. But he got the W.O. to look at the trench tool, and—as if that wasn't luck enough for the bounder!—the war broke out. The W.O. bought Garth's invention, as you saw in the *Mail,* and paid about tuppence for it, I suppose. He had a fancy to enlist in the British Army—feared the U.S.A. would be a bit late coming in, perhaps. I never heard of any American dropping into the Guards before, even as a Tommy, but it must have been easy enough with a push from Pobbles, especially as the chap's people had been English, I believe. If it hadn't been for Pobbles, Garth would certainly not have got a commission. Anyhow not with us."

"Oh, you Guardsmen think you're gods!" the girl teased him.

"Not gallery gods, in any case," Severance caught her up. "That's why we don't want that sort in our mess and clubs. Most regiments have had to put up

with a mixture of these 'temporary gentlemen,' but not Ours. Besides, 'temporary' and 'permanent' are different words. The 'temporary' kind can't be permanent, don't you see? For their own sakes, they ought to step down and out when they cease to be useful, because they never can be ornamental. We of the Brigade have a good deal to live up to, you must admit. I assure you, I'm not the only one who hasn't exactly encouraged Garth to wear out his welcome."

"How about the Colonel?" Marise inquired.

"Oh, Pobbles. He doesn't count in this scrap. He's practically never in the mess, so the bad manners and bad boots of a cad don't interfere with his digestion. Besides, he was responsible for landing us with the fellow. I don't suppose he ever dreamed for a moment that a man of that type would dare—or wish—to stay on as an officer of the regiment after the war. But there it is! To save his own face the C.O. could hardly give Garth the cold shoulder. Pobbles whitewashed himself by extolling the swine as a soldier, and quoting such stuff as 'hearts are more than coronets,' and so on."

"Aren't they?" murmured Marise.

"Oh, of course, in the way you mean. But not in the mess of a Guards regiment."

"I see," said the girl, with a blue twinkle beneath the admired lashes. For some reason it amused her to wave a red flag, and play with the lordly Severance as with a baited bull, under her mother's cautioning glances. It was just a mood. Marise wasn't even sure that she did not agree with Tony; and she was certain that Mums agreed. No lady possessed of ancestral jewels, handed down from beheaded aristocrats, could afford to hide the smallest coronet under the biggest bushel of hearts, in a mess, or a drawing-room, or any-

where! Poor Mums, she was being baited, too! But it was rather fun. And it could do no harm, since Marise counted Tony her own forever.

"So all of you younger officers have been doing your best to squeeze my poor countryman out?" she ventured on.

"Not because he's a countryman of yours. You must understand that! Because he's impossible. And for the honour of the regiment. I'm sorry to say, though, that we weren't unanimous in the matter. There have been two or three—er—not rows, but something in that line, a few men inclining to let Garth 'dree his own weird,' and learn for himself that he's a square peg in a round hole. But Billy Ravenswood and Cecil de Marchand and I took a firm stand."

"I can see you taking it!" giggled Marise. "You took the firm stand on one foot only, and kicked with the other! When you got tired of the exercise, and had to sit down, you sat on Major Garth, V.C.—sat hard!"

Severance laughed a little too, her giggle was so contagious. Besides, at last, she did seem to be entering into the spirit of the game. "Something of the sort," he admitted, not without pride in remembered achievements. "The lot of an intruder among us isn't a happy one."

"I should think not, if the rest are like you," said Marise. "I've seen you perfectly horrid to quite inoffensive people you didn't happen to approve of."

"The person you force me to discuss, dear child, is the opposite of inoffensive," amended Severance. "Can't we drop him?"

"You seem to have done so successfully already," said she. "As he's on this ship, homeward bound, the regiment is rid of him, isn't it?"

"I'm not so sure. In fact, I'm not at all sure. He's in mufti, certainly—to insult the good old word! But I understand he still refuses to confess he's beaten, and is only on long leave."

"Oh, he's in mufti! But you'll point him out, if he comes on deck, won't you, boy? After all this talk, I pine to see what he's like. If he passes by——"

"Thank Heaven, he has passed by. He's gone inside, and we're rid of him for the moment."

"Tony, you don't mean—you can't!"

"What?"

"Samson?"

"Why, yes. Didn't you realise that? Now perhaps you'll understand why we don't want this particular Samson pulling down the pillars of our temples."

"He may have heard what we said! He was walking back and forth part of the time as we talked."

"Who cares if he did hear? It would do him good—be a douche to cool his conceit."

At that instant the back of Severance's head was coldly douched. Something popped: something spurted. A jet of water sprayed over him, fizzing with such force that it blew his gold-laced Guards' cap over his eyes.

Marise and her mother were petrified. They could only gasp.

CHAPTER III

A CABIN WINDOW

AFTER the first dazed instant, the girl had a wild inclination to laugh. She suppressed it with the explosive struggle of suppressing a sneeze. Poor, dear Tony! It would be cruel to make fun of him, more cruel than if the top of his head had been blown off! For him—especially at this moment of his high boasting—it was tragic to be made ridiculous. But it was funny—frightfully funny—to see his expression of stunned rage at the accident, as he dried his face and hair with a faintly fragrant, monogramed handkerchief, and wiped something fizzing out of his eyes.

Of course it—whatever it was—must have been an accident. Yet it was odd, or perhaps merely fortunate, that all the liquid had spurted over Severance, not a drop spattering the girl's blue toque. That thought darted through the mind of Marise, and prompted a quick turn of the head. At the open stateroom window behind the deck chairs stood someone whose face she could not see. In fact, the presence of this person was indicated only by a ginger-beer bottle still pointing, pistol-like, at Lord Severance's back. The bottle was almost empty, its contents having been discharged in one rush, and a mere inoffensive froth now dribbled over the window-sill. This vision told at a glance what had occurred. The glass ball inside the mouth of the

bottle had been pushed with too great violence. But why, why, had the experiment been made at the window? Was it the act of a stupid steward, or——

An answer to the question flashed into the girl's brain, and again it was all she could do to control a shriek of laughter. (She had an inconvenient sense of humour, inherited from Louis Sorel, and earnestly discouraged by her mother.) What if—but no! The creature wouldn't dare. Or would he?

"Sorry!" said a voice. "Accident, I assure you. Hope the lady wasn't touched."

With this, Marise knew that the creature had dared. Though she had never heard the "blighter" speak, she was as certain of his identity as of her own. That, then, was his stateroom window. He had disappeared from the deck intending to do the thing, and he had done it. From his own point of view he had done it with deadly skill, and she was sure he knew without asking that "the lady" had not been "touched." Of course, he had heard what Severance said, and this was his revenge for past and present insults. It was, no doubt, the deed of a cad, or a mischievous schoolboy, but arriving on top of Severance's last words, thus douching the doucher, it was so neat that it hit the girl's sense of drama as the beer had hit the "brass hat."

She wanted to say, "No, I wasn't touched, thank you." But Severance would never forgive her for bandying words with the bounder. She expected Tony to speak—to say something, if only a "Damn you!" which would have been almost excusable even in the presence of ladies. But to her surprise he left the disguised defiance unanswered.

"Disgusting!" he exclaimed impersonally. "Creatures like that ought to be caged. I'm afraid I must

retire for repairs. But I'll be back in a few minutes. You won't go away, will you?"

"No, indeed," Mary Sorel assured him. "What a shocking shame. Poor Lord Severance! But how much worse if it had been ale or stout! Think of the horrid odour—and the stains on your beautiful coat!"

"It would have been ale or stout if the ship wasn't 'dry' on account of a few returning soldiers!" said Severance with extreme bitterness, as he got up. "I wonder it wasn't ink. Only ink doesn't spurt."

He crushed his wet cap over his wet hair, and went off, mumbling like distant thunder. Behind the chairs, the beer-bottle window slid shut, but Marise fancied she heard through the thick stained glass a wild chortle of joy.

Mrs. Sorel closed her book, with the lorgnettes to mark her page, and leaned across Tony's empty chair.

"Marise, you laughed!" she reproved her daughter. "How could you?"

"I didn't, I only boo-higgled in my throat."

"I wish you'd be more careful," cautioned the elder woman. "If you're not, take it from me, you may be sorry yet. Tony is worried about something. I noticed it the moment we came on board. You know what an instinct I have! I feel as if—but I mustn't tell you now. He may get to his stateroom and hear us."

"What makes you think he could hear us from his stateroom?" asked Marise. "Do you know where it is?"

"Why, yes," replied the other. "I was with him when he chose the place for our chairs. You were in our cabin showing Celine what to unpack. He pointed out his window, and—but my goodness!"

A gasp stopped her words. Marise followed the

direction of the puzzled or startled brown eyes. They stared at the window just closed, from whose sill ginger-beer continued to drip.

"Is that his room?" breathed the girl.

"I thought that was the window, but I must be mistaken, of course. Probably it's the next one—on my side or yours."

Marise let the question drop. She wasn't pining to confide the contents of her mind. Besides, her conjectures were too vague for words. In striving to frame them she would surely laugh, and Mums would think her a callous wretch.

Mrs. Sorel, anxious to be overheard saying the right thing, if she were overheard at all, began to chat about friends who had sent flowers or telegrams on board. Each name she mentioned had a "handle." She liked Lord Severance to be reminded casually now and then that her girl had titled admirers outside the circle he had brought round them. But Marise was not listening. She was putting two and two together.

When she suggested that the V.C. had been billeted in Tony's cabin, Tony had said neither "yes" nor "no," now she came to think of it. He had caught at another branch of the subject which she elected to pursue. He hadn't wanted her to know that the loathed Major Garth was his room-mate. Why? Oh, he would feel it humiliating to his *amour propre*. He had wished to buy a cabin for himself alone, and had been told that it was too late: "the company would do their best, but could not promise." Then, fate and the company's good intentions had picked out the one companion he would least have chosen.

It was almost too queer, and too bad, to be true; yet the more she thought of it the truer it seemed. Her

mother's impression about the window—and the lack of surprise Severance had shown after the "accident." Once recovered from the shock, he wore an air of having got what might have been expected. He hadn't even looked over his wet shoulder to glare at the sniper. Oh, Marise saw it all now! Tony had made his last remarks for the benefit of the *bête noire,* believing he had gone to the mutual cabin, but not dreaming how far a bounder, in bounding, might bound for revenge. She would have given a good deal to know whether Severance had now joined his room-mate in their quarters, and if so, what was going on.

In a hand-to-hand fight Severance would be apt to get second best with Samson, unless skill should master strength. Was that why he had flung back no challenge? But, of course, it couldn't be; Tony was not a coward. He had merely kept his temper to save a scene. Nevertheless, she wished that Garth hadn't shut the window!

CHAPTER IV

REPRISALS—ET CETERA

JORN GARTH considered himself completely justified in shooting Severance with a pint of iced ginger-beer, and even had his conscience squirmed he would have committed the act. Knowing that Severance thought of, and denounced, him as "a bounder," he didn't see why, when worst came to worst, he shouldn't live up to the reputation.

Worst had come to worst on board the *Britannia.* Things had been bad enough before, but the climax was reached when the two men found themselves caged in the same room, neither one willing to play lamb to the other's lion. Garth hated the proximity as hotly as Severance hated it; but there was no cabin of any class with a free berth, save one occupied by a coloured colonel in charge of negro troops going home. Garth had a deep respect for the dark soldiers, who had distinguished themselves in the war; but men of white and men of black skin were not quartered together; and he had never boiled to throttle Severance as he boiled at the cool proposal that he should join Colonel Dookey.

"Join him yourself," he said.

"I'm not an American," shrugged Severance.

"That's why you and he would get along better than you and me, or he and me," retorted Garth, careless of grammar.

"I shall remain where I am," Severance gave his ultimatum.

"Same here. You ought to be thankful your earlship has got the lower berth."

This statement required no answer; and the conversation lapsed.

Garth had not taken his allotted seat at the Captain's table, because he understood that ladies would be there, friends of Lord Severance. He could not trust his temper if it were strained by continued public snubbing in the presence of women. Besides, secretly shy of the dangerous sex, the man who had won the V.C. shrank like a coward from the prospect of being "turned down" by aristrocratic females. He preferred to snatch picnic meals in the hot smoke-room or to munch a sandwich on the wind-swept deck, having this one advantage of the enemy: he was a good sailor.

Seeing Severance seasick had "given him back a bit of his own," and made up for a good deal, including close quarters. Because a man can't hit a foe when he's down, however, Garth had let slip a heaven-sent chance for revenge. He refrained from jeering aloud at his brother officer's qualms. But was the said officer grateful for the superhuman sacrifice? On the contrary! To-day's work on deck was the climax. Garth had heard and seen Severance sneering at him, as he had sneered before. Sneering to men was one thing, however; sneering to the most beautiful girl Garth had ever seen was another.

Severance's attempt to drive Garth from the regiment by rendering the mess impossible, and by other methods which in contrast made schoolboy ragging kind, had only stiffened the American's resolve to "stick it." Failing the stings and pin-pricks inflicted by Severance as ringleader, and two or three of his followers, Garth would not have desired to stay in the British Army

after the war, although his father had been an officer in it. As it was, though he hadn't yet settled the future, he inclined to hold his commission for awhile, if only to "show those chaps they couldn't phaze him." He had felt bulldoggy rather than wild bullish. But catching a word or two blown to his ears by the wind on deck today, he had at the same time caught fire. Here was the limit, and down the other side! He burned to prove this to Severance in some way slightly more delicate than murder. In such a mood he slammed into their cabin, and heard a little more. Still flaming, he saw the ginger-beer bottle (by an irony of fate, Severance's bottle), and then, almost before he knew what he was doing, the thing was done. A caddish but a luscious thing! He gloried in it. As he stood at the stateroom window, the emptied weapon fizzing in his hand, it struck Garth that he had hit the nail on the head.

"That's it," he said to himself, as he watched Severance furiously sop his hair. "I've hit the nail on the head!"

Never had he been more pleased with the precision of his aim, for not a drop had gone wide of the target. He had counted on his skill to make a bull's-eye or he would not have risked the coup. Of course, Severance's friends would loathe as well as despise him; but they must admit that the reprisal was pat, and above all neat. He shut the window and roared. He hoped the trio outside would hear him, and he yearned to know what Severance's next step would be.

For this knowledge he had not long to wait; but when it came, it brought disillusion. Severance arrived promptly, still dripping, to find Garth at bay, a grin on his face.

"Your beer," said V.C. "I'll pay you for it."

He expected the other to shout "You shall!" and spring at him. Severance seemed to think, however, that the dignified course was cold silence. "Registering" scorn too glacial for language or even action, he gazed at Garth as if the latter were a worm of some new and abominable species unknown to science and beneath classification. This effect produced, he turned to the mirror and repaired ravages to his hair with "Honey and Flowers." The moment he was his well-groomed self again, he went out, having uttered not one word.

"Well, I'm damned!" remarked Garth aloud. He then laughed, also aloud. But there was a flat sound in his mirth. He felt like a good hot fire quenched by a shovelful of snow, and was not sure whether he or Severance had scored. Vaguely at a loss, like a stray dog, he took a book to the smoking room, having no ambition to parade the deck cock-o'-the-walk fashion. It turned out, however, that he could not read. He could do nothing but think of that girl—that beautiful, beautiful girl.

Every man grows up with some ideal, bright or dim, of the woman whose beauty might mean to him all romance: the woman of the horizon, of the sunrise, of the bright foam of sea-waves. The girl on A deck of the *Britannia* was Garth's ideal, his "Princess of Paradise."

He didn't know who she was, but he meant to know. Not that it would do him any good to find out. She was a friend of Severance, which meant that there was a high wall round her so far as he, Garth, was concerned. All the same, he wouldn't let much grass grow—or many waves break—under his feet before he was in possession of her name. This was about all he was ever likely to have of hers! But so much he would have, soon.

Presently a steward brought matches for his pipe. "Can you tell me," Garth inquired, "who are the ladies sitting amidships on the port side of this deck; a young lady in a blue hat, with a grey fur coat, and an older woman in brown? They look as they'd be someone in particular?"

"They are, sir," replied the man quite eagerly. "You must mean Miss Sorel and her mother; they're with the Earl of Severance."

"That's right," said Garth. "I wonder, are they the ones at the Captain's table."

"Certain to be, sir," the steward assured him.

Garth lit his pipe, and let the steward go without further questioning. He yearned to ask who the Sorels were, and why it was so certain they would be in the place of honour at the Captain's table—where he might have been, and was not! But somehow, the thought of pumping a steward for intimate details about that girl repelled him. He supposed she was "some swell" in Severance's set. Not since he had enlisted in the Grenadier Guards, nearly five years ago, had he taken leave in London. He had been eight times a "casualty," but by luck, or ill-luck, his wounds had not been "Blighty-wounds." His last leave he had spent in Paris, and the second—one summer—in Yorkshire and Scotland, because his father had been a Yorkshireman by birth.

If Garth had ever heard of Marise Sorel's success in New York and London, the story had gone in at one ear and out at the other. It did not occur to him that the Radiant Dream might be an actress. But her face haunted him, got between his eyes and his book and made his pipe go out, as sunlight is supposed to extinguish a fire.

He had rather prided himself on these old clothes of

his, on shipboard. They were full five years of age, had been bought ready-made at Albuquerque, Arizona, for twenty dollars, and were damned comfortable. Now, to his shamed surprise, he found himself wishing he had kept to khaki, as he had a right to do. Severance had called him a "clod-hopper," and he knew the word fitted him in that suit, a blamed sight better than did the suit itself!

Well, it wasn't too late yet. He could doll up in his uniform any minute; he could even claim his place at the Captain's table, and meet the Girl. His heart beat at the thought. He made up his mind he would do just that; and then as quickly he changed it.

No, he might be a bounder, but he wouldn't be a cross between an ass and a peacock. He'd go on as he'd begun. If there were a laugh anywhere at present, it was against Severance. He would do nothing to turn it against Garth.

This resolution he clung to, despite occasional wobblings, for the rest of the voyage.

. . . . . .

Garth had not a "blood relation" on earth, as far as he knew; but he had an adopted mother, and he had friends. These people lived mostly in the West. He meant to see a little life in New York before going out there, but he did not expect a soul in the east to notice his existence. It was a surprise for him when all the reporters who swarmed on board the *Britannia* from the tender made a bee-line for Major Garth, V.C. Each wanted a "story," and Garth didn't know what to say. He was too glad to see the shores of his adopted land, and too good-natured to snub the humblest, but he didn't enjoy being interviewed. He got out of the scrape as soon as he could; but there was another sur-

prise awaiting him on deck. He found himself a hero to the Custom House men!

There was no chance of finding out what had become of Miss Sorel, but as the reporters had rallied round her, and Lord Severance also, Garth was reasonably sure to read later on who the girl was; where she was going; whether or no she were engaged to his noble brother officer; and, indeed, even many more picturesque facts than she knew about herself.

It was after two o'clock when he arrived at the Hotel Belmore, where he had stayed five years ago on the eve of sailing for England with his invention. He was hungry, and aimed straight for the restaurant; but it appeared that the manager had assigned to the only American V.C. a suite with a private salon as well as bedroom and bath. A special luncheon for the Major would be served there, with the compliments of the directors. Garth could only accept with dazed thanks; and feeling like a newly-awakened "Christopher Sly," he entered a room decorated with flowers and flags. As he devoured delicious food, the New York evening papers were handed to him by a smiling waiter who had read the headings.

Yes, there he was, served up hot to the public with sauce piquante! Lord knew how the fellows had got his photograph! Must be from some snapshot caught by a *Daily Mirror* man in London, and sent over to New York for use to-day. What a great lout he looked! . . . And—gee! if there wasn't old Severance in another photo down under his. Wouldn't his earlship be wild?

Garth chuckled, and then suddenly choked. A gulp of the champagne, in which he'd been pressed to drink to his own health, had gone the wrong way. *Her*

picture had caught his eye, in an adjoining column of the *Evening World,* next to the portrait of Severance. "Our Own Marise Comes Home," was the legend in big black type above. Oh! She was American, not English! Must be an heiress if that chap intended to marry her. Severance was supposed to be poor, for a peer; had been a pauper till the death of an uncle and three cousins in the war gave him the title. . . . What? an actress! Then, it wasn't true about her and Severance —couldn't be true! That glorious girl was free! And, to judge from the way New York was treating him, John Garth, V.C., was Somebody, too. He was put above Miss Sorel's pal Severance in the papers—every one of the papers!

Eagerly Garth read about "The Spring Song" and "Dolores," the great emotional part Marise Sorel had created, and was now to revive in New York. It did not directly interest him that the whole of the old cast would support the star, but it did matter that this fact reduced the need for rehearsals to a minimum. The play would open at Belloc's Theatre next week, and it was announced that for many days the house had been entirely sold out. There wasn't a seat to be had for love or money. "But I bet I get one for both!" Garth said to himself. "A seat for every performance." Also he thought of something else he would do. The thing might not help him to make Miss Sorel's acquaintance, but it would satisfy his soul. And it would be worth all his back pay as a British officer if he could carry out the plan.

CHAPTER V

ANONYMOUS

OH, Mums, I'm so happy!" purred Marise, as she sank into a chair, physically spent, spiritually elated.

It was in her dressing-room at the theatre—the marvellous dressing-room which Belloc had engaged Herté to re-decorate as a tribute and a surprise to the star. The stage curtain had rung down on the last act, after eighteen recalls and a little laughing, hysterical speech from Dolores. Sheridan and Belloc had both kissed her; and everyone had cried, and her mother had torn her from clinging arms, to shut the dressing-room door upon a dozen faces.

Sudden peace followed clamour. There was not a sound. The air was sweet with the breath of a thousand flowers. Céline moved softly about, with stolid face. Mrs. Sorel beamed.

"Well, yes, dear; I do think you may be happy now," she vouchsafed.

Marise caught the "second meaning"—the little more than met the ear—hiding in her mother's words. Mums hadn't been easy about Severance. She'd thought he had "something on his mind." She had even been afraid that, although he was following the girl he loved from London to New York, he didn't mean marriage. She had feared, and almost expected, that he might break to Marise the news of his engagement to another woman

—a very different woman from the pretty actress. But that time of Mum's depression had been on shipboard. Severance had "broken" no news. He had been more devoted than ever before. He had curtailed his official business in Washington, and rushed back to New York for the first night of "The Song," so now Mrs. Sorel began to hope that for once her "instinct" had been a deceiving voice.

"Yes, happy about everything," she added, so that Marise might understand without the maid sharing her enlightenment.

"I am, just that!" agreed Marise, stealing time to breathe before Céline should take off Dolores' "bedroom-scene" dress.

She looked round the room. It had been decorated by the Russian-French artist, Herté (who had never seen her), to suit Sargent's portrait which Belloc had lent him to study. In the girl's opinion it did not suit her at all, unless she were in reality a tigress camouflaged to represent a sheaf of lilies. But evidently that was what Herté thought she was, and his conception of her temperament made the girl feel subtle and mysterious. She adored feeling like that, and she adored Herté's tawny orange splashes on violent blues, and his sombre blacks and dazzling whites and lemon yellows, which somehow did not fade her sunlight fairness. People knew about this room, for descriptions and photographs of it had appeared in all the papers since she and Mums landed; consequently everyone had sent flowers to match Herté's famous colourings.

There were silver azaleas, black tulips, queer scarlet roses, Japanese tiger lilies, weird magenta orchids, and purple pinks. Severance had sent blue lilies—the blue that Marise loved, and called "the colour of her soul."

The lilies had been the best of the huge collection, until the Exciting Thing came—the thing accompanied by no letter, no card. Towards this object the eyes of Marise travelled. She had been "intrigued" by it the whole evening, whenever she had time to think, and puzzle over its charm and mystery.

"It" was a table; a small, round tea-table of rich red mahogany with a well in its centre for flowers, and small holes in a line circling its edge for the same purpose. These receptacles were filled and hidden with the largest, purplest, and most fragrant violets Marise had ever seen, and their amethyst tones, massed against the dark, rose-brown wood, produced an exquisite effect. Marise believed herself an up-to-date young woman, and her Persian dressing-room in London had rivalled Lily Brayton's Chinese room during the run of "Chu Chin Chow." But she had never heard of such a design as this in tables. It must be the newest of the new, and invented by a great artist, she thought. In fear of seeming ignorant, she had asked no questions of anyone, hoping to glean information by luck: and vanity, as usual with her, had its own reward.

"By George, who sent you Herté's latest?" Belloc had exclaimed, when he bounced into her room before the first act to see if his star were "going strong."

Marise had to admit that she didn't know. But she put on an air of awareness as to Herté. This was the sort of thing her mother taught her: to seem innocent, but never ignorant—especially of anything "smart." Mrs. Sorel had suggested that Herté himself might have contributed the lovely specimen of his work, to complete the decoration of the room. Belloc, however, had vetoed this idea. If there were no accompanying poem, or at least a card, Herté wasn't guilty. He was not a

young man who bothered to blush unseen. So that hypothesis was "off"; and Marise could think of no one among her acquaintances likely to spend so much cash without getting credit.

Belloc was giving a supper for her after the theatre, and Herté was there; a dark, haggardly beautiful young man who looked as if he had detached himself from one of his own wall decorations. Belloc had placed him next the star, not knowing whether Marise were really engaged to Lord Severance or not; and the first question the girl asked was about the table.

"Ah, you have my beloved violet-table!" he said, looking at her in the way he had with beautiful young women: stripping her with his eyes and dressing her all over again in a gown of his own creation. "I am glad —glad."

"You didn't know?"

He shook his head until a black lock fell over his pale forehead. "I did not. It was finished by the glorified cabinet-maker I employ: it appeared in the window of my place. You must see my place, now your rehearsals are over! You will want beauty to rest your mind—and you will want Me to design your dresses! An hour later the table was snapped up—gone from me forever."

"Ah, but who snapped it?"

Herté looked blank. "Your admiring friend, who knew it belonged, by right of beauty, to YOU."

"Thanks! But I want you to tell me his—or her—name."

"Are you not acquainted with so much of him?"

"I'm not. And I'm dying to be, because the gentleman is anonymous—a great unknown!"

"I am sure he is great, as a judge of art and ladies. But that is all I am sure of, beautiful Dolores."

"Monsieur Herté, you are hiding his secret!"

"I could hide no secret from you. I will tell you all I know. A boy messenger bought the table. A millionaire's boy messenger, perhaps! My manager informed me what had happened. We guessed at once there was a mystery."

"Couldn't you find out?" Marise persisted.

Herté shrugged his sloping shoulders. "Beyond a boy messenger no man can go. He keeps the gate with a flaming sword. But you will find out some day. Meanwhile, be content. You have the latest creation of my brain—of my heart. At present it is the one thing of its kind in existence."

Mrs. Sorel asked Severance if he had sent the table, which, she explained, Marise had found in her dressing-room on arriving there. It had been brought to the theatre by two boy messengers, full of flowers (not the boys, but the table), and no word had been left whence it came. Severance, bitterly jealous of the secret gift (which had, so to speak, taken all the blue paint off his Persian lilies), would gladly have claimed credit had he dared. But the real giver might announce himself at any moment, and be able to prove his *bona fides*: so Severance made a virtue of necessity. Belloc's supper-party was a "frost" for him, though he sat by the second prettiest girl. He hated Herté and the others, especially a millionaire member of New York's "Four Hundred," who was financially interested in Belloc's schemes—and in his leading ladies.

Severance would have given anything—short of his title and estates, and such money as came with them—to snatch the girl from all the men, who would go on admiring and making love to her when he was far away. He did not know how he could bear to turn his back and

leave her to these Americans, who had so much money and so much "cheek." He felt as if he were throwing her to the lions—this exquisite morsel which he coveted for himself, but was unlikely to get on the terms he could offer. Almost, he wished that he had told her the truth in London, and said good-bye to her then. Almost, but not quite: for he simply had not been able to let her go like that. He had to be with her: he had to see the sort of men she would gather round her on the other side of the world.

Well, he had come; and he had seen; and he had made things harder for himself instead of easier. He did not know what he should do next. An arrangement, a compromise, must be thought of. When he spoke, he must have something to propose—some alternative or other. But what under heaven, or in hell, it could be, he had no clear inspiration yet.

Marise ordered the violet-table to be taken from the theatre to the Plaza Hotel, where she and her mother had a suite. She thought it would give her more pleasure there, where much of her time was passed, and the wonderful violets had not lost their freshness: they were so firm and vital that they looked as if they would never fade. But on the second night of "The Song," when Marise arrived in her dressing-room, another anonymous gift awaited her.

It was smaller than the table, but not less original; a black bowl, half full of water bright and pale green as aquamarines, on the surface of which floated three pink pond-lilies. The bowl stood on the star's dressing-table, and, switching on the electric lights, a gleam as of drowned emeralds sparkled under the lilies. Marise cried out in delight, and ran to look for a card. This time he would reveal himself! (She knew it was "he,"

and that it was the same man who had sent the table.) But no. There was neither card nor note. Messenger boys had brought the bowl. They had driven up in a taxi. If only Marise had dreamed of receiving a second gift from the same source, she would have watched—or even employed a detective. She was so excited and curious that she feared for her acting that night.

With the bowl and the lilies had come a large jar of crystals for tinting the water: green, glittering lumps, like precious stones from Aladdin's Cave, and that was precisely the label on the jar of jewels: "Aladdin's Cave." Marise was childishly thrilled. When Belloc peeped in, she showed her treasures, and learned that "Aladdin's Cave" was the name chosen by a queer artist, new, but famous already for his exhibition-shop in a cellar of that Bohemian haunt known as Greenwich Village.

Next morning the girl went there in a taxi: and when she had bought exotic enamels, and transparent vases filled with synthetic sapphires, she told "Aladdin" about the bowl. Like Herté, he shook his head. He was but another man who "could not go beyond a District messenger boy."

The stage door-keeper was now warned to find out what he could, if another anonymous gift appeared. Also, Céline was sent early to the theatre. Marise could not, however, quite bring herself to engage a detective. She was tempted to do so, and urged by her mother, who had visions of a mysterious millionaire ready to take the place of Severance if the Englishman failed after all. But the girl felt that to set sleuth-hounds on its track would kill romance. It would, she told Mums, be like deliberately rubbing the bloom off hothouse grapes before you ate them. And as it turned

out, she was glad she had listened to sentiment; for on the third night her only offerings were chocolates and flowers ticketed conspicuously with their givers' names.

This was like a too abrupt ending to a fairy tale. But, after all, it was only the end of a chapter. On the fourth night a long blue-and-silver box lay across two chairs in the dressing-room. It looked like a box from a smart dressmaker, though no dressmaker's name was visible. "Has Mademoiselle ordered anything?" Céline inquired, as she untied the ribbon-fastenings.

No, Mademoiselle had ordered nothing that day—at least nothing for the theatre. She gave a little gasp as the Frenchwoman removed the box cover and a layer of silver-stencilled blue tissue paper. Underneath filmed a pale blue cloud which Marise snatched up and pronounced to be a "boudoir gown." It was made from a material which fashion names mousseline de soie one year and something else another. It was the blue of bluebells, banded with swansdown and embroidered with silver thistles. Altogether, it might have been created expressly for Miss Sorel by an admiring genius.

"From Herté!" exclaimed Mums.

But Marise knew better, and would pit her own "instinct" against her mother's any day. "No, from Him," she pronounced. "If this goes on much longer without my finding out who He is, I shall simply perish."

And it did go on: not night after night, but stopping, and beginning again just as she thought the giver's invention exhausted or his pockets empty. It went on for ten days, until Marise had received, in addition to the three first gifts, an ancient Italian mirror in a carved silver frame; an exquisite wax doll, modelled and dressed to represent herself as "Dolores" in the

third act of "The Spring Song," and an old Sèvres box filled with crystallised violets—evidently *his* favoured flower.

"He must be rich, or else he's poor, and so in love that he's absolutely beggaring himself for you," said Mrs. Sorel.

Marise volunteered no opinion. But secretly she preferred the second hypothesis. She was used to rich men; but no girl is ever really used to Romance. The mystery thrilled and delighted her, and bored Severance to distraction. He realised that, if he said to the girl what he had to say while this spell was upon her, she might let him go with hardly a pang, instead of clinging to him at almost any price. So he did not say it. He waited, and sent several cables to his mother's half-brother, Constantine Ionides, one of the richest bankers in Europe. In the first of these telegrams he stated that he had influenza, and might not be allowed to travel for several weeks, but, as soon as he could, he would return to London. This, because he had come to a certain understanding with his half-uncle before undertaking the American "mission," and because Mr. Ionides unluckily knew that the unimportant mission was now wound up.

At the end of ten days the girl decided upon a desperate step, for she felt that "Dolores" as well as Marise Sorel was beginning to suffer from curiosity deferred. She forgot to take a cue on the night of the doll; and at home, after she had been in bed an hour, she suddenly sat up and switched on the light. On a table within reach of her hand were paper and envelopes, and a gold fountain-pen given her by Severance. Quickly she wrote out a paragraph which she had composed in the sleepless hours; and without a word to Mums (sure to

disapprove) she gave it very early next morning to Céline with instructions.

That evening, in some of the New York papers, and the following day in all those which had "personal" columns, her paragraph appeared. "Dolores thanks the anonymous friend who has sent her six charming gifts in ten days, and begs that he or she will make an appointment to call at her hotel as soon as possible, in order that Dolores may express her pleasure and gratitude by word of mouth."

When Marise read this appeal in print her heart beat in her throat, and she was dreadfully afraid that her mother or Severance might happen to glance down that column. But she was even more afraid that the person to whom it was addressed might not.

CHAPTER VI

ON SUNDAY AT THREE

"OH, by the way, Miss Marks," said Marise, "you needn't trouble to read my letters this morning. I—er—slept badly, and I'm up at such an unearthly hour, I might as well go through them myself."

She spoke from the doorway between her bedroom and the salon, where Miss Marks, her secretary, was taking off gloves and hat before getting to work; and she had on the boudoir gown of mousseline de soie and swansdown sent by the Great Unknown a week ago. This was the first time she had worn it, and Miss Marks's eyes sent forth a flash which might mean admiration or jealousy, or both. Marise diagnosed the emotion as jealousy. If she were right, she was sorry for the girl, who, though handsome, could not compare with her, and who, though very intelligent, was only a stenographer, at about twenty-five: two years older than she, who was already a brilliant star!

This thought was but a flash, brief as the flash in the secretary's eyes, for instantly the mind of Marise turned to the letters. Thank goodness she was in time! Another three minutes, and she might have been too late. Miss Marks would by then have begun her first task of the day: opening letters and sorting them, placing requests for autographs and photos in one pile, pleas for money in a second, demands for advice or help about going on the stage in a third, and so on. Who

could tell if the one envelope whose contents no eye but Marise Sorel's should see mightn't lie at the very top?

As a matter of fact, it did not lie at the top. It was nearer the bottom, and long before she found it Marise had begun to fear that it didn't exist.

The trying part was that the envelopes told her nothing. She had to cut or tear open each one, unless she recognised the handwriting of the address, and could then throw it aside till later. She went through the business curled up on a sofa, sitting on one foot, which showed among snowdrifts of swansdown. It was a stockingless foot, thrust into a silver *mule* lined with blue velvet; and her skin was satin smooth and creamy pink as the inside of a conch shell. Miss Marks noticed this, and noticed also how long and thick was the plait of yellow-brown hair that dangled over the sofa-back, its curling end within a few inches of the floor. She smiled faintly as she saw how fast her employer worked, and how she tossed the letters aside after a fevered glance at each. Marise was quite right. Miss Marks was very intelligent! She knew, almost as well as if she had been told the whole story, just why Miss Sorel had got up at so "unearthly an hour" this morning.

"Ah, now she's found the one she didn't want me to see!" the dark girl said to herself, as the face of Marise turned suddenly pink, and bent over a letter which she read through twice from beginning to end. Then, lest she should be caught staring, Miss Marks began to arrange her newly-sharpened pencils and the writing-pad on which she would take down, in shorthand, letters dictated by Miss Sorel.

She need not, however, have troubled herself with these elaborate precautions. Miss Sorel was interested in and puzzled by this handsome young Jewess with the

burning eyes and wet-coral lips; but for the moment Miss Marks's very existence was forgotten.

The letter had come, as Marise hoped it might, on this the second day of her advertisement; but the mystery remained unsolved. Indeed, it was purposely kept up, for the thick parchment paper had neither initial nor address. The few words on the first page were unsigned, and only one secret was given away: but to Marise this was of great importance. The strong, black handwriting was certainly that of a man. She would have turned sick with chagrin at sight of a woman's penmanship.

"It is I who have to thank you, not you me," she read. "You are very kind to invite me to call, and say I must come soon. I will take you at your word. Unless I hear to the contrary through a second 'personal' in the *New York Record,* I will ask for you at the Plaza Hotel at three o'clock next Sunday afternoon."

This was all, and Marise hardly knew whether to be pleased or disappointed with the brief simplicity of her anonymous admirer. He, whose original ideas in presents had made her imagine him the most modern and mundane of men, expressed himself on paper rather like a shy, old-fashioned schoolboy. A dampening doubt oozed into the girl's mind. What if he hadn't picked out those wonderful things himself? What if he had got some woman to choose them? But even a doubt—a piercing, new doubt—had its fascination. And after Sunday it would be gone for ever. She would know the worst—or best—of her Mystery Man.

On Sunday afternoons she and her mother were "at home" to their friends, from four to six; He proposed coming at three, however, and he was sure to be prompt

to the moment. That ought to give an hour before extraneous people began to pour in. But—what about Mums? Marise concentrated her mind upon that pressing problem.

Mums was as curious as she concerning the unknown. But Mums, though an absolute trump and a darling, was the most conventional woman on earth. Just because she and Marise were not born to the high sphere they now adorned, Mums was determined that neither should be guilty of the smallest act unworthy of—at least—a countess. Naturally, as Mums herself would admit, if you were already a countess, you could perhaps afford to do what you pleased: and to judge from "smart society" columns many countesses availed themselves to the full of their prerogatives. Marise might soon be a countess; and if so, Mums would cease to dictate from the rules of an etiquette book; but until that day those keen brown eyes needed no lorgnettes to watch a daughter's doings.

After a few minutes' reflection, the girl decided that she would not confess to Mums what she had done. It would mean a scolding as a first instalment, and a serial continued day by day of gentle, motherly nagging. Marise loved her parent, but she hated to be nagged. No. Mums must somehow be whisked out of the way before three o'clock next Sunday, and kept out of it long enough for an understanding to be reached with Him.

Of course, Marise said to herself, she wouldn't tell a fib. She would just explain frankly (she could see how she would look, her eyes very blue and big, being frank with Him!) that she hadn't dared tell anyone, even her mother, about the advertisement. And she would beg him to "help her out" when she—er—made it seem as

if he'd merely written to say he would call unless he heard to the contrary. By that time she would know his name, so the thing could be managed easily, and Mums never suspect to what lengths she had gone. As for Severance, the coast would be clear of him on Sunday till long after three. Dunstan Belloc was giving a "stag" luncheon that day, at one-thirty, and she had persuaded Tony against his will to accept. But Mums? How dispose of her? Suddenly a bright idea swam to the rescue.

Marise slipped the Unknown's letter into a pocket disguised as a bunch of silver thistles. Then, with large, innocent eyes, she turned to her secretary, "Oh, Miss Marks!" she exclaimed. And being an actress, it occurred to her that the young woman addressed was surprisingly absorbed in removing lead-pencil dust from her manicured fingers. If she—Marise—had been secretly studying Miss Marks's profile or back hair, she would have been equally absent-minded if addressed! She wondered for the fiftieth time whether it was a coincidence that Miss Marks had called on the manager of the Plaza the very day after the Sorels had asked him to find a private secretary.

At first, when Marise saw how handsome the girl was, and heard that she'd "hoped Miss Sorel might want someone," the wary young actress feared that Miss Marks wished to go on the stage. But now the stenographer had been coming to the Plaza each morning for a week, and had not thrown out such a hint. She was, indeed, entirely business-like, and possessed of good references. Still, the fact remained that she had never before applied to the manager of this hotel; and her appearance had been apropos as that of the sacrificial sheep caught in the bushes. Besides, Marise had often

observed that odd, appreciative flame in the black eyes, as if Miss Marks were more interested than a secretary need be in her employer.

"Yes, Miss Sorel?" the dark girl responded. "Would you like me to take dictation?"

"Not yet, thanks," said Marise. "I haven't had my bath or breakfast, and I'm hungry. But I've thought of something. Mother and I were so excited about that Polish boy-dressmaker genius you were talking of yesterday. He sounds wonderful; and, as he's only beginning, I suppose he's not choked with orders. He might do some work for me in a hurry?"

"I think he'd sit up at night and go without meals by day to work for you," replied Miss Marks. "It would be such an advertisement. And he loves working for pretty people."

"Well, I love helping geniuses." Marise modestly accepted the compliment. "Didn't you say his flat is on your floor?"

Miss Marks answered that this was the case. Valinski would move to a fashionable neighbourhood some day. At present his talent budded in 85th Street.

"I wish I could go to him myself," sighed Marise. "I can't now, for I'm so hard-worked and tired. But I thought mother might take a taxi after lunch next Sunday and choose a design for a tea-gown—his specialty, you said. Would he see her on Sunday—about a quarter to three, so she could get back for her friends?"

Miss Marks was certain of Valinski's consent. She would come for Mrs. Sorel, if that would suit, and take her to the dressmaker. Marise thought it would suit: and Mums, arriving at that moment dressed for the day, an appointment was made.

The life of Marise Sorel was so full, the pattern of each day so gaily embroidered with emotions and incidents, that she was surprised at her own excitement. She did not, however, try to quench it. She loved to feel that, in spite of the adulation she received, one side of her nature was as fresh, as unspoiled, as a child's. And she was as guiltily pleased as a child when, at twenty minutes before three on Sunday afternoon, her mother went down to a waiting taxi with Zélie Marks. Patronising the Pole and choosing a design would eat up an hour, Marise had calculated.

She had put on a white dress of the simplicity whose price is beyond rubies. Her hair was in a great gleaming knot of gold at the nape of her neck. She looked about sixteen, and felt it. When the bell of the telephone rang at three minutes before three, she thrilled all over.

"A gentleman asking for Mademoiselle. He says he has an appointment," announced Céline at the 'phone.

"Any name?" Marise inquired.

Céline put her lips to the instrument, the receiver to her ear. "The gentleman has given no name, because he is expected. But if Mademoiselle wishes that I insist——?"

"No. Tell them he's to come up at once. And, Céline, be ready to open the door of the suite."

The Frenchwoman went out noiselessly: Marise rushed to the long mirror, in front of which tall, scented roses were banked. Her cheeks were very pink. She was like a rose herself. But hastily she rubbed her little nose with powder from a vanity box. The gold case was only just snapped shut, and Marise seated with a book, when she heard a sound in the vestibule. He had come!

CHAPTER VII

SAMSON AGONISTES

MARISE raised her eyes from an uncut volume of poems, and looked into the face of—Samson.

The shock of disillusion was so cruel that the girl felt faint. She was giddy, as if she had stooped too long over a hot fire and risen abruptly.

So this—*this*—was her Man of Mystery, he who had held in unseen hands more than half her thoughts for a delicious fortnight! She had deigned to advertise in a newspaper for the pleasure of meeting this lout, spurned by his smart regiment, despite his Victoria Cross: this cad, whose notion of revenge was to explode as a bomb a bottle of ginger-beer!

The warm glow of anticipation was chilled to ice. The hands that tightened on the book went suddenly cold. Marise did not know what to do. She wavered between an impulse to be rude and the dutiful decency of a hostess. Meanwhile, forgetting to act, she stared at the tall figure as if at an approaching executioner. No one but a blind man or a fool could have failed to see in those beautiful eyes the blankness of disappointment.

John Garth was neither blind nor a fool, and that look of hers was a sharp-edged axe which "hit him where he lived," as his bruised mind vaguely put it.

He too had been like a child. Ever since the day of landing in New York he had planned and existed only

for this moment. He had coached himself for it, dressed himself for it, spent his money like water for it. And this was his reward. The sight of him was a blow over the heart for his queen of romance. It blanched her cheeks. It made her physically sick.

Céline had softly shut the door behind the guest, but involuntarily he backed against it. If he had been a few years younger he would have turned like a country boy and rushed away without a word. But there are some things a man can't do; and others he must do. Garth had to say something—the sooner the better.

What he said—or what said itself lamely—was: "You didn't expect to see me?"

"No. I—didn't," Marise as lamely agreed.

"Do you want me to go?" he blundered. "If you do, I will."

"No—no," she breathed a lukewarm protest. "Don't go—please. I—I'm only a little surprised. I remember—seeing you on the ship, of course. And I didn't think——"

"You didn't think I'd force myself on you—by false pretences."

"I was going to say, I didn't think of seeing anyone to-day—whom I'd ever seen before." The ice of her shocked resentment melted slightly in the reflected fire of his pain. "That's all! Do—sit down, won't you? I'm so grateful. I want to tell you how much—how much I thank you for those beautiful things."

As she spoke, the girl's face flushed again. After all, the man had done nothing so monstrous. He couldn't be blamed, perhaps, for not realising that merely by being himself—by being a bounder whom his brother officers rejected—he had broken the charm of the mystery. He couldn't know how undesirable he would seem

to a girl of her sort. And the way he had dressed himself up like a provincial actor playing a duke, to make his call, was pathetic! Besides, there was the money he'd spent on her—hundreds and hundreds of dollars which he couldn't afford. Oh, she was glad that she hadn't followed her first fierce impulse, and been rude!

Garth had not accepted the invitation to sit down. He remained standing upright as a stick, and stolid as a stone, against the door. Evidently he stuck to his resolve to take himself away, and was delayed only by the mental puzzle of how best to do it. With a repentant throe the girl sprang up, light and lithe from among her cushions, holding out her hands.

"I do thank you!" she exclaimed. "And I *want* you to sit down."

Her look, her gesture, overcame him. He took a step forward, seized the offered hands, and almost crushed them in his. Marise was rather frightened, rather touched, but not too much moved to notice that he didn't know enough about behaviour to take off his gloves—his brutally new, gamboge-coloured gloves! Or else he was absent minded!

Partly because her one ring was pressing into her finger, partly because she wished for instant release, she gave a little squeak of pain. "Oh, my ring!"

Red blood poured up to the man's brown face. The pressure relaxed, but he did not let her hands go. He lifted them to his lips and kissed first one, then the other. His mouth was hot as a coal just dropped from the fire! . . . That was her quick impression. She was not shocked, for her hands had been kissed a hundred times by sad, mad men—though not men like this. She said "Oh!" however, and gazed at him reproachfully,

as "Dolores" gazed at the villain in "The Song."

The effect upon Garth was the same as if she had been sincerely offended. He let her hands fall, and stammered "Forgive me!"

Marise was beginning to enjoy herself a little, on the whole.

Of course the man was common and rough. What was it that Tony had called his despised brother officer? A "temporary gentleman!" Yes, that was it! And a "momentary gentleman" would be even more appropriate, she thought, because at an instant of deep emotion all decent men were raised to the heights of Nature's gentility. This fellow was as fine as any nobleman, for these few seconds of time, she realised, and it was worship of her which added the new decoration to his V.C.! Despite her disappointment, she felt that romance was not utterly lacking in the situation.

"There's nothing to forgive," were the obvious words her lips spoke: but the language of such eyes as hers could never be obvious. The soul of John Garth drowned in their blue depths. As dying men lose all care for conventions, so did he lose it while thus he drowned.

"I love you—I love you!" he faltered. "You know, don't you? From the first—from the first look!"

"Oh no, I don't know that," Marise soothed him. "But you've been so kind. Those wonderful presents! You ought not——"

"Thinking of them—sending them—has been the big joy of my life," he broke in. "I've been—drunk with it. I've never felt anything like this before. Why, I'd die for you; I'd sell my soul. Even that's nothing!"

"They're very great things," she assured him gravely, as she had assured other men of different types who had

flung themselves on her altar as burnt-offerings. "Any woman would feel the same. But——"

"I don't care a hang what any other woman would feel. All I care for on God's earth is you—you. Couldn't you think of me—couldn't you, if I tried to make something of myself——?"

Marise laughed a charming laugh. "Isn't it making something of yourself, to have won the Victoria Cross?" she challenged.

"Oh, that! That was an accident. I just got so mad I forgot to be scared for a minute or two, and went for a few Germans——"

"The newspapers compared you to Horatio keeping the bridge against an army."

"George! You remember that?"

"Women don't forget such things." (She would have forgotten if that clipping from the *Daily Mail* hadn't associated itself with Tony's onslaught upon the regimental hero. But she wasn't called upon to mention this.) "It was long before I saw you, that I read what you had done, and fixed your name in my mind," she went on. "Now I have my own special memories of you. I shall keep your gifts always. And I shall be prouder of them than ever, because they came from a hero——"

"You're breaking it to me that there's no hope," he cut in. The blood was gone from his face now. "Nothing I could do, or try to be, would make you like me well enough——"

"Oh, you are too impulsive!" she checked him. "You've seen me only twice——"

"I've seen you every night since we landed, and twice a week in the afternoon."

"What, you've come to the theatre for every performance, even matinées, just to—to——?"

"Hear your voice and see your face. And hate that damned actor-chap who kisses you in the third act."

"He doesn't really kiss me," Marise hurried to explain. "He only seems to."

"God! He must be a stone image!"

"He is a gentleman," amended Marise. "Actors who are gentlemen don't kiss the actresses who play opposite parts, unless—unless it's absolutely necessary."

"Then if I played a part with you on the stage, I couldn't be a gentleman," Garth exploded. But even as he spoke he blushed darkly. "You don't think I am one *off* the stage," he added. "And you're right. I'm not what your friend Lord Severance calls a gentleman. I know what he does call me, and I am that, I guess, anyhow when he's within gunshot. He brings out all that's worst in me. There's a lot of it—so much, that if that thing on shipboard was to do over again, I'd do it without a qualm. I suppose there's where the 'cad' element he talks about in me shows up. If he was here now——"

"Ze Earl of Severance, Mademoiselle," announced Céline.

Whether Garth had meant to boast or belittle himself Marise would never know. Nor did she care. All her faculties concentrated upon how to account to Severance for the man. It was a suffocating moment. She feared a scene between the two. The situation called for a stroke of genius. Was she equal to it? She must be, for Garth's sake and for her own, even more than for Tony's, and what he would think.

Severance came in. Suddenly Marise felt as she had felt on the stage when something went wrong with the

play. She had often had to save situations by sheer, quick mother wit. Never had she failed her fellow actors in a crisis. She ought to be ready for this!

Her nerves ceased to jump. She was calm and confident. As Severance's darkening gaze fell on Garth, she heard herself glibly explaining the latter, as if to an audience.

"Major Garth is a friend of Miss Marks, my secretary. She has gone out for a few minutes with mother, but he is waiting for her. She'll soon be back."

Speaking, she smiled at the V.C., and her eyes pleaded excuses for the fib. "It's only a white one," they said. "And it saves our secret. I know you'd hate me to tell him you'd sent the presents, and I never, never will. That is sacred, between us two. So is all the rest. And I'm trying to straighten things out for us both."

Garth appeared to be astonished, but not shocked. His silk hat (a size too small) lay on a table in a pool of water from an upset vase, he having flung it there to free his hands for hers. Now he made a move to retrieve his damaged property, but a second thought gave him pause. Marise read his mind as if it worked under glass. Her fib about Miss Marks had doomed him to the part of Casabianca, while the ship of his pride burned.

The "lion-look" she had seen in the man's eyes that day at sea was in them again. Poor brute at bay, caged with Severance! The girl pitied him. But things must take their course. Luckily for the success of her lie, Miss Marks was not returning with Mums. She—Marise—need only say, when the latter arrived alone, what a pity it was! Thus Samson would automatically obtain his release.

The men nodded to one another, as polite enemies must sullenly do in a woman's drawing-room. Then Severance turned to Miss Sorel with the air of sponging Garth's mean existence off the earthly slate. "I'm early," he explained, "because the hotel people sent me a cable to Belloc's place. I told them to do so, if one came. My Uncle Constantine Ionides is ill, and I'm afraid I shall have to go back by the first ship I can catch. I hoped to be in time for a few words with you before your friends began to drop in."

This was hard on the intruder, forced against his will to turn a "company" into a "crowd," and Marise's kind heart might have resented the slap if her mind had been free. But it was instantly preoccupied with Tony's news. He was going home! He wanted to talk with her alone. This could mean only one thing. She supposed that he wished her to understand as much; and either he took Garth for a dunce or intended him to understand it too. It was as if he said to the bounder: "You're welcome to what you can find in your own class: Miss Marks and her set. But eyes down and hands off this girl. She's mine."

The hint was too broad, the position too humiliating, for Garth's temper to bear in patience. Like the caged brute in Marise's simile, he searched the bars for some way of breaking through. But he could not leave her in the lurch. Practically, she'd ordered him to "stand by," and he'd have to do it, unless some look of hers gave him leave to bolt. The look did not come, however, and he could not guess that the girl was merely too absent-minded to give it. She had suddenly become as self-absorbed as a hermit-crab when he pulls every filament of himself inside his ample shell. As Miss Sorel questioned Severance about the telegram, Garth was

left to his own resources. He felt gigantic in the small, pretty salon, where Chinese jars and ribboned pots of flowers left hardly room for a clumsy fellow like him to turn among frail chairs and tables. He knew that Severance knew how he writhed in spirit, and that Severance knew he knew. How much worse was this ordeal than a petty barrage of ginger-beer! Severance was scoring heavily now. Garth thought in dumb rage that he would give a year of life for some way to pay him back. And the girl, too! He loved her with a burning love, but at this moment the difference between love and hate was as imperceptible as that between the touch of ice and a red-hot poker. She was being very cruel. Garth felt capable of punishing her—with Severance—if he could.

He took his hat from the table, and rubbing the wet silk with his glove, stained the yellow kid. Incidentally he made the hat worse. He wandered to a window looking over the park, and longed to jump out. In his awkward misery, the man's raw sensitiveness suffered to exaggeration. Staring jealously at the crowd below —walking, driving, spinning past in autos—he knew the emotions of one penned at the top of a house on fire, gazing down at the safe, comfortable people free to pursue their daily business of life, and love, and work. Behind him, Marise and her friend jabbered (that was the word in his head, even for her sweet voice) as if he were invisible. Desperation seized him. He turned, and down went a stand with a statuette and the Sèvres box the "Unknown" had sent Miss Sorel. It was poetic justice that *his* gift should be the thing smashed!

Marise said "Oh!" Severance said nothing. He stood still, fingering his miniature moustache with the

air of a man who expects a lackey to repair damage. Garth saw red; and if he had picked up a piece of the broken box it would have been to hurl it at the dark, sneering face. But Heaven sometimes tempers the wind to shorn lions as well as lambs: and if Providence did not order the entrance of two women at that instant, who did?

It was Mrs. Sorel who appeared and (Marise gasped) Miss Zélie Marks. Out of her shell in self-defence, the actress would have rushed to save this scene, as she had saved the last—somehow, anyhow! But to her bewilderment Garth took one great stride towards Miss Marks and snatched her hand as drowning men are said to snatch at straws. "How do you do?" he exclaimed eagerly.

"Miss Marks and Major Garth are friends," Marise rattled off to her mother. And to herself she added, "How smart of him to guess who she was! Or—did he know?"

The secretary's cheeks were stained carnation, and she was handsomer in an instant than Marise had thought she could be in a year. Her black eyes were twinkling. Did she guess that she was a pawn in a game, and had she so keen a sense of humour as to laugh? Marise was more interested than ever in this young woman: and Mrs. Sorel, not knowing the plot of the play, was yet warned by her famous "instinct" that something queer, something dangerous, was in the air.

She was a woman who prided herself on presence of mind. Marise hadn't expected her secretary to return, therefore it seemed unlikely she would have encouraged the Bounder to wait for Miss Marks. And as for that, why was the Bounder here? Being here, the further he

could be kept from Marise and Severance the better. She herself had no time to weave spells for him. Miss Marks must do that, and take him away with her when she went. Without appearing to pause after Marise's announcement, Mary Sorel smiled at Miss Marks. "Talk to Major Garth, my dear," she patronised, "while I explain to my daughter why we tore back in such a rush."

Zélie Marks took the lady at her word, and drew her "friend" apart. By the remotest window the two halted, standing confidentially close, the girl looking up at the man, the man looking down at the girl. As the conversation was now only of Valinski's dress designs, not Severance's plans, Marise had a sub-eyelash glance or so to spare for the couple. Well, certainly Samson was a creditable actor, or else . . .

"They were all so lovely I dared not choose," Mums was expatiating. "I said to Miss Marks, 'Suppose we run back in the taxi and let my daughter select? Or, she may want to order more than one of the gowns.' So I slipped the designs back into the portfolio Mr. Valinski had taken them from, and asked permission to borrow the lot. Lord Severance must tell us which he prefers. He's such a good judge! And Miss Marks can carry back the portfolio, with a note from me to Valinski, when she goes."

The three heads—Tony's glossy black, Marise Sorel's glittering gold, her mother's a rich, expensive brown—bent together above a trio of water-colour sketches. Under cover of selection Severance whispered: "I have some bad news. Marise knows it. But I've got to have a talk with you both before I leave this room. I can't bear suspense. For heaven's sake get rid of people as early as you can."

"Must talk to them both. . . . Couldn't bear suspense!" The woman agreed with the girl in thinking there was but one interpretation for this!

"I'll do my best," murmured Mrs. Sorel, and resolved to begin the good work by bustling Miss Marks and Major Garth off the moment the tea-gown business was finished. In the midst, however, Mrs. Dunstan Belloc breezed in with her pretty sister and Belloc's millionaire backer. Mary Sorel moved to meet them with the manner she had copied from Tony's great-aunt, the Duchess of Crownderby. So doing, she slipped Valinski's portfolio into her daughter's hands with an unduchess-like, "Hurry up and choose, and have done with it!"

Somehow, Marise had not the proper new-dress thrill this afternoon. She languidly decided on a classic design which Severance liked, and Valinski had named "Galatea."

"Put the others back in the portfolio, please, Tony," she said. "I must go and help Mums"—but the microbe of accidents was running amok in the Sorels' salon. Tony dropped the book, and the Pole's designs fluttered about the room. Everybody squealed and began picking up papers. One had fallen on the remains of the Sèvres box, as if to hide the wreckage. Garth was nearest the scene of his own disaster. He stooped. Marise seized the chance for a word with him. She stooped also. Each grasped the sketch, which came face uppermost; and under their eyes was the design for the blue and silver gown sent by the Unknown.

Zoyo Valinski had made that dress, then, and sacrificed an advertisement to keep Garth's secret! Zoyo Valinski lived in the house with Miss Marks, and was recommended by her. H'm! H'm!

These thoughts jostled each other in the brain of Marise, and brought in their train another. Naturally Garth had not been shocked at her fib. He didn't know it was a fib! The surprise was only that Miss Sorel had hit on the truth and used it so glibly.

"That Marks girl helped him choose the things," she told herself. And she was as much annoyed as puzzled. She wished to fling at Garth: "You sent her to our hotel manager to ask for my work. Why, she's simply spying on me, for you!"

But she said nothing of the sort. Indeed, she had no time. Seeing Marise and the Bounder together, Mary Sorel flew to part them. "Miss Marks wants me to say she'll be ready to go in a few minutes," the anxious lady encouraged Garth. "She's been captured by Mrs. Belloc. It seems she did secretarial work for her once. Come, and I'll introduce you. I've just told Mrs. Belloc that you are *the* V.C."

It was half an hour before the man's martyrdom was ended. The worst had been suffered at the beginning, when he was the third in a reluctant trio. But it was all bad enough. He was as well suited to this jewel-box of a salon as a bull is to a china shop, and he had done nearly as much damage. He didn't know what to say to Mrs. Belloc or her smart, chattering friends, and they didn't know what to say to him. Even a Victoria Cross couldn't excuse such taste in clothes as his! The big fellow's necktie was a scream; his gloves (no other man kept on gloves!) a yell; and his boots—literally—a squeak. That was the description of him which Mrs. Belloc planned for the entertainment of her husband, and Garth saw it developing behind her eyes.

"Give me the trenches!" he thought, when at last

Miss Marks wriggled free of the actor-manager's wife. He still hated Marise as much as he loved her. Yet when he said "Good-bye" he did not mean it for farewell. He determined ferociously that he would see her again. "Next time," he resolved, "I won't knock over any tables. I'll turn them. I'll turn the tables my way perhaps, and against that damned pig of an earl!"

CHAPTER VIII

WHAT THE STAR SAID

THANK Heaven she's gone, and it's ten minutes past!" fervently sighed Mrs. Sorel, as the door closed behind a guest she had kissed warmly on both cheeks. "Céline, 'phone down and tell them not to send anyone else up, no matter who. We needn't be 'at home' a second after six."

She and Marise and Severance now had the sitting-room to themselves. The girl, who had been too busy feeding others to eat anything herself, selected a macaroon from a half-empty dish and nibbled it prettily. Severance regarded the charming creature with clouded eyes, wondering how much appetite their talk would leave her.

"How dear of you to stay and see us through!" cooed Mary, as if she had not known Severance's impatience equal to her own. She did this to lead up to her own tactful exit; and the mere male swallowed her bait without suspicion.

"See you through?" he echoed. "Why, I've been hanging on by my eyelids, waiting for my chance with you and Marise."

"Unless it's something you need me for," the chaperon said sweetly, "perhaps I might leave you to Marise's tender mercies. I'm a little tired——"

"I do need you," Severance assured her. "I don't dare to say what I've got to say to Marise alone. If I did, she might misunderstand. I can't risk that. Mrs.

Sorel, this talk means everything to me. You're my friend. Promise *you* won't misunderstand."

Mary Sorel retained a fixed, kind smile; but she had a sickly sensation under her Empire waistband, as if something inside had melted and then cooled. She glanced at Marise, to judge if the girl had been in any way prepared for this queer outbreak. No, evidently not! The blue eyes looked large and suddenly scared. Marise stopped eating the macaroon, and, going slowly to the table, she laid the nibbled remnant on somebody else's plate.

"Why, of course I'll stop," Mary said. "I'm not so tired as to desert you when you flatter me like that."

"I'm not flattering, I'm depending on you." Never before, in her acquaintance with him, had the voice of Severance betrayed such agitation. Mary braced herself against a blow; but the melting thing inside began to congeal like cold candle-grease. Her knees felt like water. Still smiling, she sank rather than sat on a sofa, and held up her hand to Marise.

"If Lord Severance has a confession to make, we'd better sit together in judgment," she proposed. "We'll be kind judges, and this shall be our throne."

"Call it an appeal—a prayer—not a confession," Severance said. "If I'd ever prayed to God as I'm going to pray to you both, maybe I'd not be in the fix I'm in now."

"One would think you were afraid of us!" quavered Marise.

"I am," he admitted. "I was never in such a blue funk in my life. My legs are like poached eggs without toast."

The girl laughed nervously. "You'd better sit down," she advised.

"I couldn't to save my life. Might as well ask a chap on the rack to sing 'Araby.'"

"You're really frightening us!" Mary's tone was shrill. "Have Bolsheviks blown up your family castles? Have you lost all your money? Aren't you the true heir to the title?"

"I'm the heir right enough," Severance took her seriously. "And I haven't got any money—worth calling money. There's the rub! Marise, you know I love you?"

The girl caught her breath. "Why—sometimes I've thought so."

"You've known it, as well as you know you're alive. If I hadn't come into the beastly title I'd have asked you to marry me long ago. It was your own fault I didn't ask you, before my Cousin Eric died—the first one of the lot to go. You used to snub me every time I tried to speak of marrying. You didn't want to make up your mind!"

"No, honestly, I didn't," she confessed. "I liked you a whole lot, Tony, but—I wasn't quite sure—of either of us, you see, and——"

"You might have been sure of me! I couldn't look at any woman except you."

"It wasn't that sort of thing—exactly. People—cats!—used to put such horrid ideas into my head."

"What ideas?"

"I simply can't tell you, Tony. Don't ask me, please."

"Oh, well!" he flung out. "It doesn't matter much now what ideas you had then. Do you love me to-day, Marise?"

"I—think I do—a little," she almost whispered, as

her parent's arm (twined round her waist) pressed painfully against her side.

"A little isn't enough!" Severance said. "It must be a big love to stand the strain."

"The strain of what?" Mary, as a mother, intervened.

"Of the sacrifice I'm going to ask—to beg, to implore—her to make."

"Sacrifice? Do you mean anything about money?" Mrs. Sorel wanted to know. "You were quite right in calling me your friend. I can assure you it would be a joy to Marise if, in your trouble, her money——"

"The trouble's worse than money."

"Tell us quickly," the girl bade him. "You said you couldn't bear suspense. Neither can I bear it. We're both fond of you, Tony—Mums and I. What hurts you, hurts us." And her tingling brain suddenly, inappropriately, gave her a picture of Garth, as he had stood tall and stiff against the door. He, too, had said, in vibrating tones, that he loved her. He had begged her to give him a chance; implored that she would let him try to be worthy. As if, poor fellow, he ever could come up to her standard! What girl of her breeding would think of him twice when there were blue-blooded, perfectly-groomed Greek gods like Tony Severance on earth? Mentally she whistled John Garth, V.C., down the wind to low-lying valleys peopled with girls like Miss Marks.

Tony was pale with the dusky pallor of olive complexions; his pleading eyes were like velvet with diamonds glittering through. She had never realised how he loved her—he, whom so many women worshipped. She felt that she loved him dearly, too. For the first

time her heart was stirred warmly by his extraordinary good looks.

"You know all about my Uncle Constantine, my mother's half-brother," he said, leaning on the mantelpiece and nervously lighting a cigarette (Mrs. Sorel and Marise permitted this; even smoked with him now and then). "Well, Uncle Con had very little use for me till by a fluke I got the title. I never expected a penny of his money, though he was my mother's guardian before she ran away with my father. He thought I was a rotter, and didn't mind my knowing his opinion. He didn't exactly forbid me his house in London, for he'd been fond of mother in his hard way, but he gave me no encouragement to come. His vacillation was because of my cousin Œnone. Did I ever speak of her to you?"

"You may have mentioned her," said Marise. "But, of course, we knew of her existence. There are always things in the papers about people with such incredible stacks of millions as the Ionides family have. She's a 'poor little rich girl,' isn't she? An invalid—something the matter with her spine?"

"She is an invalid," Severance answered. "But as years go, she isn't a 'little girl' any more. She's close on twenty-two. I doubt if she'll ever see twenty-three in this world."

"Pathetic!" sympathised Marise. "All that money couldn't give her happiness!"

"She thinks," said Severance sullenly, "that only one thing can give her happiness—marrying me."

"Good gracious!" gasped Mrs. Sorel. Her blood flew to her head. Was he asking Marise to love him, only to break the news that she was to be jilted?

"Œnone has cared, since she was a tiny child,"

Severance stumbled gloomily on. "It really was pathetic, then. When she began to grow up (not much in size, poor girl, but in years, you know), Uncle Con would have shut the door on me if he hadn't been afraid Œnone would die of grief. He thought me cad enough to cook up some plot, and contrive to marry the girl behind his back—for her millions. But when I got the earldom, a change came o'er the spirit of his dream. . . . He's a born snob, is my half-Uncle Constantine! He always loved a title, and hoped he could squeeze one for himself out of some British Government, but he's never succeeded, so far. Instead of chasing me away with a stick, he invited me to come as often as possible. And just before you arranged to sail he made me a definite offer."

"You don't mean——" Mary Sorel broke down in the midst of her sentence.

"I do. He said if I would marry Œnone, and 'make his daughter a countess' (real old melodrama stuff!) he'd settle a million pounds on me, on our wedding-day. Also, I'd inherit Œnone's private fortune. Darling Marise, dear Mrs. Sorel, if you knew all the money troubles I've had, and have still, you'd forgive me if I told you this was a temptation."

"But you didn't yield?" Mary prompted.

"No-o. Because Marise was sailing for the States, and I couldn't let her come over here without me, to be gobbled up by some beastly American millionaire. I had to be with her. I had to!"

"That is real love," cried Mary. "I'm proud of you."

"I'm not proud of myself," he mumbled. "I got that bally mission. I persuaded Uncle Con to believe—at least I hope he more or less believed!—that it was

thrust on me, instead of my doing all I knew to bag it. I told him I'd decide directly I returned to England—which would be soon. But it hasn't been soon. He's a man who gets inside information about official things. He knows the mission is finished, and I could go home any day I liked. Presently, if I'm not jolly careful, he'll find out why I don't like. Then my goose will be cooked. Marise—Mrs. Sorel—I simply can't afford to have that happen."

"What do you propose to do?" Mary challenged him, dry-lipped.

The black eyes blazed despair. "What can I do?"

"Tony," said Marise softly, "I've got 'normous lots of money saved up; 'most two hundred thousand dollars. You don't need to grovel in the dust to any old Greek banker, if he is your uncle. So there!"

"My poor, sweet baby," groaned Severance. "What's two hundred thousand dollars? Fifty thousand pounds, isn't it? That's pin money for you and your mother; and you go on making more while you stay on the stage, as a spider winds silvery thread out of itself. But for me it's not nearly enough, as things are now. It wouldn't save the situation. I've come into more than that amount with the estates. It's a drop in the bucket, I find. The fellows behind me in the succession resigned themselves to poverty. I can't, for the best of reasons. I'm in a beastly moneylender's hands. I began by owing him ten thousand pounds. It's more like eighty thousand to-day. Now, maybe, you see where we stand."

"No, I don't see yet, where we are concerned," Mary objected. "You said you'd some suggestion—some proposal to make. But if Marise's money isn't enough to——"

"It isn't, even if I could take it."

"And if you're considering the idea of marrying your cousin——"

"I've got to marry her. That's all there is to it. I've realised it since a heart-to-heart talk old Con forced me to have with him a fortnight before we sailed. I saw that some day this thing would have to happen."

"Then where—does Marise come in?" Mary suddenly bristled like a mother-porcupine.

For a moment Severance did not speak. It seemed that he could not. His gaze turned first to Marise, then to Mary. Could it be possible that those black eyes of his glittered with starting tears?

"I'm going to tell you," he said slowly, at last. "I want to tell you on my knees. It's the only way a man could dare to say a thing like this to a girl like Marise —to a woman like you, Mrs. Sorel."

He did not wait for a word from either, but dropped to one knee, and threw his arms about both women as they clung nervously together. They could feel the throb of blood in his muscles. His face was no longer merely handsome; it was beautiful with a tragic, Greek beauty. The look in his eyes (Mary thought vaguely, as one thinks under a light dose of ether) would touch a heart of stone.

"I've got to marry Œnone," he repeated, "or come the worst cropper of any Severance for a century. If I'd never met you, Marise, I'd have done it without a qualm. Œnone's a nice little thing—not the sort to keep a man in leading-strings because she holds the purse. I could have amused myself without much fear that she'd fuss—or tell tales to her father. But when a man loves a woman as I love you, it changes his out-

look. I must see you. I must be with you. I can't live away from you for long."

"I'm afraid you'll have to when you've married Miss Ionides," Mary's frozen voice warned him.

"Wait! Listen to my plan. I've only just thoroughly worked it out. I——"

"Yet you told us a minute ago that you'd decided on this marriage before sailing."

"That's true. But don't be so hard on me. You promised to be kind judges. Put yourself in my place, if you can, Mrs. Sorel. My love for your girl is more than love. It's a flame—a driving passion. Can a man reason coldly when his blood, and his brain too, are on fire! I had to come with her to New York. I couldn't look ahead further than that. I mean to make some plan, and God knows I've tried, day and night. I've thought of little else. But every idea I had was shut up inside what they call a 'vicious circle.' I could see no way out that Marise would accept—or you would let her accept. Then this last cable of old Con's came today, while I was at Belloc's. It is a kind of ultimatum. I know he means me to understand that. You can see it if you like—only let me go on now—as I'm started. It would be worse beginning again. He says he's down with 'flu, and Œnone is ill too, and he must see me to 'settle the matter under discussion, or it may be too late.' Those are his words. They're a threat. By Jove, it was a douche, reading that in the midst of a jolly luncheon! I saw stars: but one of them has sent me a ray of light. I almost prayed to get its message. First time I've prayed since I was in the nursery! Yet here I am on my knees to you both, to tell you what the star said.

"Uncle Con may have 'flu, and he may die, but he's

sure to tie everything up tight. I'm marked for slaughter. There's no squirming out. But poor Œnone can't live long, even if she gets the toy she wants to play with—me. Her father doesn't thoroughly realise that she's doomed, but her doctors do. One of them is a friend of mine. He told me. She's got some queer kind of incipient tuberculosis, and chronic anæmia. Happiness—such as I can give her—will only be a flash in the pan. I'll be more of a nurse than a husband. Well, I'm willing to go through all that, and do my honest best for her, while she lives. But if *I'm* to live, I can't be separated for a year—or at worst, let's say two years—from the light of my life, the core of my heart. I must be able to meet Marise, to have her society, her friendship—by God, I swear I mean no evil! I must have something, I tell you, if I'm to get through that probation. Well, I see as clearly as you both see that we must have no scandal—for her sake—and for mine, too—and even for Œnone's. I don't want to distress the poor little thing! So here's the plan that jumped into my brain ready made. Don't cut me short—don't tell me to stop before I've explained—before I've got to the end."

"Go on," said Mary Sorel, in a strained voice. Marise did not speak. She felt dazed, as if she were in a feverish dream.

"Suppose I marry; suppose I bring my—suppose I bring Œnone (I can hardly call her a 'wife') over to America for a change of air, a tonic. She'd like that. She's always wanted to travel, but her father had no time; and she wouldn't have been happy with paid guardians. I'd paint a glowing picture of California—or Arizona: they say it's great out there for tubercular people. Even Œnone's own father would approve of

such a trip if—if Marise were supposed to be out of the running. Don't speak! I'm going to explain! What I mean is this. . . .

"Old Con is the opposite of a mole. He knows I've been a different man this last year. He ferreted out the truth somehow—did it himself, or with a detective's help. Probably himself: he's that kind. He doesn't trust his secrets to others. He didn't object openly to my American mission. In a way, it was an honour. But, of course, he learned that I was sailing on the ship with you two. He hasn't given me a day's rest since we landed. I wired I'd had 'flu. (I did get a cold last week!) Then he took a leaf out of my book. Now he's developed the disease! If Marise were acting in New York and touring the States, he'd smell a rat if I prescribed America for my bride's health. But if Marise were married to another man, and had left the stage——"

"Good heavens!" Mary bounded on the sofa, and gasped aloud. But Severance pressed her down with a strong arm.

"You promised to let me finish!" he urged. "Now you'll begin to understand why I wouldn't say all this to Marise alone. Asking you to be with us proves my respect for her—for you both. This isn't only the plea of a desperate man—though it's that first of all! It's a business proposition. The day I marry Œnone Ionides, I become master of a million pounds. That's five million dollars. One million of those five million dollars I would offer to a—dummy husband for Marise. Let me go on! A man who'd understand that he was to be a figurehead, and nothing more. You'd say—if you'd say anything—that only a cur in the gutter would take such a position, and a cur in the gutter would be of no use

to us. To rise above suspicion—even old Con's suspicion!—He'd have to be a decent sort of chap to all appearances, a man who might attract a girl—even a girl like Marise. He'd have to have some money of his own already, and some sort of standing. With that in his favour, the world and my uncle would accept him as a husband Miss Sorel might choose. Such a person could be found—for a million dollars. I know men of all sorts, and I guarantee that. With a million dollars behind her, Marise could give up the stage—she'd do that, anyhow, if she married me. She could travel west with her dummy husband (and her mother, of course, that goes without saying!) By that time, I'd be over here again with poor Œnone. We could all meet—by accident. In England, even that might make talk. England's too small for us. But over here, in a big free country—especially out west—it would be safe. We should see each other, Marise and I. And I'd ask no more than that. For a while I could live on the sight of her—and hope. When Œnone's little spark of life burns out, as it must before long, with the best of care possible, Marise at once divorces her dummy. He gives her technical cause, of course. That's part of the bargain I make with my million. No breath of scandal against Marise! And, a few months later, she and I are married. There's only this short road of red-hot ploughshares for us both to tread. Then, instead of marrying a pauper, such as I am now, and both of us battening on her bank account—she'd perhaps be forced to go back on the stage to keep the pot boiling—my darling girl finds herself the wife of a very rich man, one of the richest peers in Great Britain. For in addition to old Con's million pounds, I should have Œnone's private fortune. He has agreed to that, with her, in

the event of her death, which he hopes may be long delayed by happiness, and which I know won't—can't possibly be. . . . There! I've finished at last! The only thing left is for me to tell you over again that my life depends on your decision. I believe I'll kill myself if the answer is 'No.'"

CHAPTER IX

SOMETHING OUT OF ANCIENT ROME

THE hot torrent of words ceased. There was silence in the gaily-tinted, flower-filled salon, save for the tick of an absurd Louis Seize clock on the mantel. Under the gilt wheel of Time a cupid balanced back and forth, in a Rhinestone swing—"Yes," "No," the seesaw motion seemed to say.

The stillness was terrible to Severance. He did not get up from his knees. He did not release the women's waists from the girdle of his arms. His eyes were on the face of Marise. Never had he seen her so pale.

"For God's sake, speak!—one of you," he stammered.

Abruptly the girl pushed his arm away, and sprang to her feet.

"You are wicked!" she cried. "Horrible! It can't be true that this has happened to me. It's a nightmare. I want to wake up!"

Severance abandoned his prayerful position and faced her. He would have caught her hands, but she thrust him back with violence.

"I thought you were a modern Englishman, like other Englishmen—like all other decent men I've known. But you're not," she panted. "You're something out of the Middle Ages. No! you're before that. You're of Ancient Rome—the time of the Borgias. Or Beatrice Cenci."

"Don't, don't, Marise, my child!" Mary joined soothing with command. "You'll make yourself ill. We must be calm. We must think."

"Think?" the girl repeated. "What is there to think about? Surely you don't suggest that I should 'reflect' —that I should study whether to accept or not such a—bargain?"

"That's a hard word!" Severance pleaded. "And as for Ancient Rome, I should say that it and modern Britain—or France—or even your own America—are the same at bed-rock. We're all volcanoes with our lava cooled a bit on the surface by laws—or civilisation. Human passions don't change; and the strongest of them is love. Anyhow, it is so with me. I'm half Greek, you know, and my English half is half Spanish."

"Dearest, when I tell you to 'think,' of course it depends on whether you love Tony or not," Mary Sorel reminded her daughter. But even she did not dare touch Marise at that moment. It would have been much like trying to pat a young, unfed leopardess. She, always keeping on the conventional side, had never before called Severance "Tony" to his face. As a parched patch of earth thirstily sucks in the least drop of dew, he caught at this sign of grace, and thanked his stars that he had made a reckless bid for Mary's friendship. She adored England and old English customs; above all, old English titles. In the midst of gratitude, the man knew her for a snob, and counted on the sacrifice she would offer the god of Snobbery. If anyone could help him, she could. If any counsel could prevail with the hurt, humiliated, angry girl, it would be her mother's.

"Do you love him?" Mary persevered, when Marise kept silence behind a bitten red lip.

"I did love him. I thought I did."

"Darling, I know you loved him, and do love him. You're suffering now. But, remember poor Tony is suffering too."

"Poor Tony!"

"Yes, poor Tony. He has gone through a great deal, and has kept it in, hoping against hope. He didn't speak out till there seemed to be no more hope—except in this one way. I told you, even on shipboard, I felt he was living under some strain. I'm a woman, and your mother. I'd be the first on earth to resent the slightest insult to you, if it were meant. But just because I'm a woman, who has lived through a woman's experience of life and love—love of husband—love of child—I recognise sincerity by instinct. Severance is truly sincere. He worships you, and if he has been carried away, it is by worship. Don't drive him to desperation by refusing to forgive him, whatever else you may decide to do."

"It rests with you, Marise, whether I live or die," Severance was now encouraged to plead.

The girl's lips trembled. "Oh, if only I could wake up!" she cried. Tears poured over her cheeks. Mary caught the shaking figure to her breast. The two wept together.

"We must—must face things!" Mary let herself sob. "I'm afraid we *are* awake—wider awake than we've ever been in our happy life these last three years. We took the pleasant side of things for granted. As they say over here, we're 'up against' the grim side now. If you love Tony only half as much as he loves you, why, it seems to me you ought—indeed it's your duty

to your future—to think twice before sending him out into darkness, with no light of hope."

"Things like my plan often happen to people, just by accident," said Tony. "A man who loves one girl has to marry another. His wife dies. Meanwhile, the first girl has taken a husband—perhaps out of pique. He's a rotter. She divorces him. Then the pair who've loved each other are free to be happy ever after. If they're rich, too, so much the better for them! They don't feel guilty. Why should they? They've nothing to feel guilty about. Why should it be so appalling if a man, to save his soul and his love, plans out something of this sort, instead of blundering into it? I can't see any reason. Aren't you being a Pharisee—or a hypocrite, Marise?"

"Aren't *you* being a Joseph Surface?" she flung back. "Perhaps I never told you that I played 'Lady Teazle,' and got a prize at my dramatic school. So I know all about the 'consciousness of innocence.'"

The girl spoke stormily. Her eyes blazed at the man through tears. Yet he and Mary both knew from her words—her tone—that in spite of herself she had begun to "think."

"Joseph Surface was a cold snake," said Tony. "At worst I'm not that, or I wouldn't be ready to wade through fire and water to win you at last."

"No, you're not a cold snake," Marise agreed. And the eyes of Severance and Mrs. Sorel met, as the girl dashed a handkerchief across hers. Mary's glance telegraphed Tony, "This sad business may come right, after all!" "You had better leave us, my friend," she said aloud. "Marise and I will at least talk this over—thrash it out, and——"

"A thrashing is just what it deserves," the girl snapped. "A thorough thrashing!"

"It shall have it," Mums soothed her patiently. "But we may think——"

"Even if we did think," Marise broke out, with a sudden flash at Severance, "what good would it do? Even if I were willing—though I can't conceive it! What use would that be? You can't kindle a fire without a match. There isn't a man living who'd be the match. A dummy match!"

"You forget the million dollars," Severance said.

"I don't. But you admitted yourself, he must at least seem a decent man, or the scheme would fail. No decent man——"

"Some smart actor who fancies himself, and dreams of having his own New York theatre," cried Severance, inspired. "With a million dollars——"

"He'd want me to stay on the stage and star with him——"

"Well, then, some inventor who'd sell his soul to have his invention taken up. A million dol——"

The phrase called back an echo in the girl's mind. "I'd sell my soul!" What man had used those words to her that day—an hour ago? . . .

Marise laughed out aloud. "An inventor!" she exclaimed. "Oh, it's easy to generalise—to suggest someone—anyone—vaguely, in a world of men. But if I should name one—if I should say, 'Here's the man,' you would shudder. The thought of him in flesh and blood as my husband—dummy or no dummy—would drive you mad—if you really love me."

"I wouldn't let it drive me mad," Severance swore. "I'd control myself—and control the man, too."

"You would? Suppose I name your *bête noire,* Major John Garth?"

Severance withered visibly. "Garth wouldn't do it," he stammered.

"There you are!" sneered Marise. But she began to experience a very extraordinary sensation. It was composed of obstinacy, anger, vanity, recklessness, resentment, and several fierce sub-emotions, none of which she made the slightest effort to analyse. Tony Severance believed that his passion for her excused everything, because he thought it stronger than any other man living had ever felt. But there was another man, one at least—who thought and said the same thing of himself.

Much as Tony hated and pretended to despise John Garth, without stopping to reflect an instant he set the Bounder aside as one among a few men who wouldn't stoop—who couldn't be tempted—to play so low a part as that of a "dummy husband." Was Tony right? Or was the man he discarded the very one who would marry her at any price? Dimly she wondered in a sullen and heavy curiosity.

"There are plenty of other fellows—of sorts—to choose from, without dragging in Garth," Severance went on. "Give me leave, Marise (give me new life, by giving me leave!), to find such a man. If I must go without finding one here, I will search England. Or I can put it in the hands of——"

"No!" shrilled Mary. "In no hands but our own."

"I wash mine of it!" cried Marise.

"Perhaps you will think it over—the pros and cons—with me, dear," coaxed her mother. "The wonderful future you could have with Tony, when the clouds should pass and all those millions——"

The girl shrugged her shoulders. And turning without another word, she whirled away to her room. It would not have been true to nature if she hadn't slammed the door!

Mary prepared to follow. "Go, Tony," she ordered. "Leave the poor child to me. All this is awful—terrible! But it isn't as if we were wishing for Miss Ionides' death. If she's doomed . . . Oh, I hear Marise crying! Go at once—please!"

CHAPTER X

THE THING SHE COULD NOT EXPLAIN

MARISE and Mary Sorel talked late that night in the girl's room. The family breadwinner—always indulged—had not been so petted, so spoiled, since she was threatened with *grippe* in the first week of her great London triumph. In those days she had shone as a bright planet rather than a fixed star. The proud but anxious mother had feared that some understudy might mine the new favourite's success, as Marise had mined the toppling fame of Elsa Fortescue. The invalid had been surrounded with the warmth of mother-love, caressed, almost hypnotised back to health, and after a worrying day of high temperature had been encouraged to the theatre without giving the understudy even one night's chance. This, although that young woman was dressed and painted for the part!

So it was again on this fateful Sunday in New York, although the most wily Vivien of an understudy could now safely be defied.

Mary went in to Marise the moment Severance had gone. She kissed and cooed over her child. She flattered her. She told her that she was beautiful and brave—*too* beautiful! Men loved her too much. Mums warded off an impending attack of hysterics which Marise had been longing to have, and would have enjoyed. She said that her girl's tears burned her heart. She kept Céline away and undressed Marise herself,

with purrings and pettings as if the girl had been three instead of twenty-three.

Never was a bed so sweetly smoothed to the downiness of a swan's breast! The pillows were plumped almost with a prayer, that they might yield soft rest to the aching head. Finally, Marise—conscious of all Mums' guile, yet dreamily content with it—was tucked in between the scented sheets, her "nighty" put on by Mums; her long hair brushed and braided by Mums, as no French maid could ever braid or brush.

"Don't think of anything yet," the loving voice soothed. "Just bask, and let your poor old Mums watch over you. Forget you're grown up. Be Mummie's baby girl again."

Marise was not of a temperament to hold out against these charms and woven spells. She cuddled down in bed, and felt an angel child. When Mums herself brought in a tray containing a few exquisite little dishes, she ate, though she had expected—even intended—to starve herself for days. Then when one glass of iced champagne (she didn't touch wine twice a year) and a tiny cup of Turkish coffee had brightened her spirits, "poor old Mums" (looking thirty-five at most, and mild as a trained dove) brought cigarettes for both. After that, they drifted into talk of the future, rather than driving stormily into the teeth of it, like tempest-tossed leaves.

Mary confessed that, if she were in her daughter's place, it would be anguish to give up such a wonderful, gorgeous young man. And then, he was so handsome! No one could compare with him in looks. What eyes! They were pools of ink, on fire! She had never known what tragedy human eyes could express till she had gazed into those of Lord Severance to-day. They had

frightened her! If she hadn't sent the man away with a grain of hope she believed that by this time he would be dead, his brains blown out. One didn't take such threats from most people seriously. But Tony was different. It was true, as he said; love was his life—love for this one dear girl. What Mums felt was, that *she* couldn't have resisted him, at her daughter's age. Few women could. Few women would!

By this time, Marise being ready for arguments, her mother engaged in a fencing match, at first with a button on her foil, then with the point gleaming bare. Boldly she talked of what Severance (enriched by his uncle and a dead wife's will) would have to offer. Was he, and all that would be his, to be thrown away for a scruple? A millionaire earl? A unique person?

About two a.m. Marise agreed to Mary's many-times-reiterated wish that she would "think things over"; and promptly fell into a sleep so sound that she looked like a beautiful dead girl.

Miss Marks was sent away next morning by Mrs. Sorel, because "My daughter has had a bad night, and mustn't be disturbed." It was not until eleven o'clock that Marise waked suddenly in her darkened room, as if a voice had called her name. She sat up in bed, dazed. Whose voice was it? Or was it only a voice in a dream? Thinking back, it came to her that she had been dreaming of John Garth—"Samson." With an "Oh!" that revolted against life as it must be lived, she flung herself down again, and remembered everything. For an hour her body lay motionless: but mind and soul moved far. When Mums tapped lightly at the door, and peeped in to inquire, "Do you feel like waking up, pet, and having me bring you a cup of delicious hot coffee? It's twelve o'clock!" she answered quietly,

"Yes, I've been awake a long time. I'd love some coffee."

Mary brought it herself—and a covered plate of buttered toast. She asked no question except, "Is your head better, darling?" until pale, composed Marise had bathed, and been dressed with the aid of Céline. Then Mums chirped cheerfully, "Well, what are you going to do to-day? Anything important?"

"It may be important," said Marise. "I don't know yet—till I've talked with him. It depends on what he says. He may say nothing. He may just bash me over the head and stalk away. He'd be capable of that."

"What do you mean?" Mary implored. "Are you speaking of Tony?"

"Oh no! Of a very different man. Of Major Garth."

"Marise! What are you going to do?"

The girl turned from her dressing-table to face her mother. "What you've been goading me on, all last night, to do. What I shall be perfectly mad if I *do* do! Now, please, don't say any more—unless you want me to scream. I'm keeping myself calm. I'd better stay calm—till after."

Mary's breast heaved. She breathed back her emotions, as one checks a cough. "You—talk the way you sometimes do after a dress rehearsal!" she tried to laugh. "Before a big first night."

"That's the way I feel," said Marise. "Like before the biggest first night that ever was. Or before the Judgment Day."

She knew that John Garth was staying at the Belmore. She had seen that item in the papers—had seen it in the same day's papers which had informed Garth that Miss Sorel was an actress. The girl began a letter, but tore it up. Then she thought of the telephone. Two

minutes later she heard Garth's voice: "Hello! who is this talking?"

"Marise Sorel—calling you from the Plaza. Can you come over?"

"Yes. When?"

"Now."

"I'll be there as soon as a taxi can bring me."

"Good!"

Yet she knew that it was far from good.

. . . . . .

"The Spring Song!—The Spring Song!"

The name of Marise Sorel's play sang itself over and over in Garth's brain to wild, strange music, as the taxi flashed him to the Plaza; for there was spring in the air, in the bursting buds on the trees in the park—and in his breast. She must have changed her mind. She must mean to give him some hope, or she wouldn't have sent for him to come back. That would be too cruel—even for her, as he had thought her yesterday, when there was no spring, only winter in his heart and soul.

It was not till he had been rushed up in the lift, and a page-boy had knocked at the door, that the hope seemed too good to be true. Perhaps she merely wished to apologise for being rude? Yet—even that would be better than nothing. It was what he hadn't dared expect—being sent for again. He had resolved to see her in spite of herself, but she was making things easy. This time, not Céline, but Marise herself opened the door. The sight of her gave the man a shock of joy, though she hardly looked him in the face.

"You're very kind to be so prompt," she glossed over the surface of their emotions. "Come in. I—I've something special to say to you."

"So I judged," he helped her out.

"We shan't be disturbed by anyone to-day. I've arranged that."

"I'm glad."

She sat down with her back to the light and made him take a chair facing the window. He knew too little of women to realise that this was deliberate; but he noticed that she seemed more of a woman, less of a girl to-day. Perhaps, he thought, this was because she wore a black dress. It was filmy and becoming to her fairness; but it made her graver, more dignified. As for Marise, she liked his looks better this afternoon. He had not had time to "dress himself up"; and his morning suit of tweed was not objectionable. She remembered once arguing with Severance that the "Blighter" might be distinguished-looking, even handsome, if decently dressed. She was in a fair way to be proved right to-day, but she was in no mood for self-congratulation. The man's personality didn't matter in the least, she told herself. Yet she was subconsciously burning with curiosity concerning him.

"First of all—before we start on our real talk, I'd like to ask you a question," she began. "Did you send Miss Marks here, to—" ("to spy," she had almost said!) —"to try and get work as my secretary?"

"I did not," promptly replied Garth.

"But you knew her—before yesterday."

"I knew her out in Arizona, before the war. She'd written me since she was working at the Belmore. That was how I happened to think of going there before I went over to England in 1914. She's a good stenographer, and a good girl. Since I landed she's done a lot of letters for me, and done them very well."

"She's clever!" admitted Marise. "I asked, because

I never quite understood how she happened to come here to see if I wanted a secretary. Besides, there's something in her manner—the way she looks at me—I hardly know what—but as if she had reasons of her own for being interested——"

"Perhaps she had. And perhaps it's my fault," Garth spoke out. "You see, I'd set my heart on sending you a few presents, something not just ordinary. It popped into my head to do that the day I landed. Reading about you in the papers gave me the idea. But it didn't seem easy, when it came to choosing. Miss Marks began work for me that same afternoon, for I had a heap of back correspondence, and I hate writing. I couldn't keep my mind on the dictation for wondering what I could send you, different from everything and better than anything. That's how I said to myself, 'Why not ask Zélie Marks what there is to buy in New York?' And that is what I did."

"I thought as much!" exclaimed Marise.

"But I didn't tell her about you. I didn't mention who the things were for. I just described the lady. I said, 'She's beautiful, with golden hair and blue eyes, and dark eyelashes and dazzling white skin. She's tall and slender, and I expect she's rich and has everything she wants. The things I'd like to give her must be so new she hasn't had time to want them yet, but so stunning she won't know how she lived without 'em.' Miss Marks hit on the right stunt from the first. Your name has never been spoken between us till yesterday, when we went out of this room together. I suppose you believe me, don't you?"

"Yes, I believe you," Marise grudged. "Miss Marks simply guessed. But I wonder how? Could she have

seen your theatre tickets—seats for every performance of 'The Song'?"

"By George, yes! She may—must have done. I ordered them the first day at my hotel. They were in a bunch, tickets for three weeks, fastened with an elastic band, on the desk where she worked. I've got a private sitting-room, like a howling swell."

"So Miss Marks chose all those exquisite things!"

"She told me about 'em, and where to look. Then I went, and picked out in my mind's eye what I wanted. I always had a messenger-boy waiting in a taxi, and sent him in to buy, and pay on the spot, for fear someone else should jump in ahead. That kept up the mystery. I didn't care to have you find out at once that the things came from me. I was afraid it would queer the whole business for you."

"So it would!" Marise might have capped him. But she did not. Instead, she asked, "But surely you meant me to know sooner or later—or where would be the fun?"

"There was plenty of fun in sending the presents and knowing the secret myself," said Garth. "Silly, I guess! But there it was! And—I might as well tell you now—I did kind of hope you'd try to get at the truth, one way or another, just from pure devilment."

"You were right. I did! 'Just from pure devilment.' In the same way that Miss Marks got work with me. She must have been enjoying herself these days!"

"She's a nice girl," Garth defended the absent.

"Oh, I don't mean to discharge her. There's no reason why I should. She's useful to me. I shan't seem to know anything about this. But I wanted to ask you."

"I'm mighty pleased you did," said the man. "I'd

have been—just what your friend calls me, if I'd sent her to get an engagement with you."

Colour stole into Marise's pale cheeks. She had been more interested in the subject of her secretary's connection with Garth than she had expected to be when bringing it up, and for a few minutes had actually forgotten the loathed burden on her heart.

"Let's say no more about Miss Marks!" the girl exclaimed. "My inviting you to call to-day had nothing to do with her. I only thought I'd—clear the air."

"Is it cleared now?" Garth wanted to know. "I hope it is. If not——"

"Oh, it is—quite!"

"Then you're ready to tell me the real thing you have to say?"

"Ye-es. . . . Only I . . ." She paused. Her lips had gone so dry that she could hardly speak. Her brain felt dry, too—desiccated. She had not thought it would be like this. Stage-fright—the worst attack of stage-fright she could remember—had not been worse. Yet she cared little or nothing for this man's opinion, she reminded herself, except as it concerned the plan. "I—it's very difficult."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" he offered eagerly.

Marise caught at his words. "That's just it! There's a very big thing you can do to help."

"You know I'll do it," Garth volunteered. "You know that, because there's nothing I wouldn't do. I told you so yesterday."

"If you hadn't, I should not have sent for you to-day."

"I wish you wanted me to kill somebody for you."

(She guessed, by the fierce gleam in his eyes, what "body"!) "I'd go to 'the chair' singing."

"Oh!" she laughed feebly. "It's not as bad as that." (But wasn't it?) "You—you said several things here yesterday afternoon. One was, that you——"

"That I love you! Was that what you mean?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's the same to-day. Only more so."

"Even after—I'm afraid I was very selfish and thoughtless. I wasn't as nice to you as I ought to have been, after I'd got you to come, and—and——"

"You weren't nice to me at all," Garth gave her the truth bluntly. "I went away trying to hate you, but I didn't bring it off. Hate, if it starts from love, is a good deal like a boomerang, I guess. It comes back to what it was born from. And the friction stirs up the flame till it's hotter. Now, tell me that thing I can do for you. Because the quicker I hear what it is, the quicker I can set about it."

Marise threw up her head and drew in a long breath. She might have done the same if she had come, with a running jump, to the edge of a precipice.

"Would you—like to marry me?" she gasped.

The man bounded from his chair, and with a stride landed himself beside her. He had knocked over a smaller chair on the way, but this time he was untroubled by his clumsiness. He grabbed, rather than took, the girl's hand. She was afraid he would drop on his knees, and that would have been more than she could bear, because it was what Severance had done. But this stiff-backed soldier kept to his feet. He held her hand high, so high that the blood drained from it to her heart, and the little hand was white in his (save for the pink, polished nails) as a marble model. "You've

changed your mind?" he asked hoarsely—because his mouth, too, was suddenly dry. "You know I love you more than any other man could. So you think, after all, you might grow to care?"

"It isn't that," she had to tell him. "I haven't—exactly—changed my mind. This hasn't anything to do with 'caring.' Only, if you do love me—as much as you say—you might be willing . . ." She could not finish. She felt his fingers suddenly tighten on hers, then loose them, as if he would dash her hand away. He did not do this. But, looking up, the girl saw that the man's face was scarlet. She even thought that a few beads of sweat had broken out on his forehead. What had she said to move him like that? Why, she hadn't even begun!

"What is it?" she inquired. "What is it you think I mean?" Her eyes were large and innocent as a child's.

The blood ebbed slowly from the weathered face. "Whatever I thought, I don't think it now," he said harshly. "No one could, and look at you. Go on."

"But," she argued, "perhaps what you thought was right. I can't be sure, unless you tell me."

"I'd sooner die than tell you."

"Well, then I had better try and tell you what I do mean. After that you can see if your thought was the same. If so, and you feel it is so dreadful, you may go, and turn your back on me without another word."

"No, I wouldn't turn my back on you. Not even for that—now." The words left his lips heavily, like falling stones; and there was a strange look in his face. If it had come there in battle, it might have meant desperate courage which nothing could daunt and would have brought him a bar for his Victoria Cross. But

being in a hotel salon, with no enemy present more dangerous than a beautiful young girl, it was only mulish.

"Would you want to marry me if I didn't love you one bit, and if we—didn't live together, except as friends? You and mother and I, all in the same house?"

He did not answer for a moment. Then he rapped out, "Do you need a husband to protect you—against some danger?"

Marise shook her head. "It isn't so romantic as that. No one is persecuting me. I—cared a little for somebody. I thought maybe he and I might be married. But things have altered with him. He has to marry a very rich girl. I haven't got money enough, it seems—although he loves me."

"The damned brute!" burst from Garth. (He knew who the "brute" was, well enough.)

"Don't call him that," Marise pleaded. "I understand how things are with him. But——"

"I suppose people have coupled your names. Good God, I'm thankful you sent for me! No one shall ever say he jilted you. It shall be the other way round. When will you marry me, girl?"

It was a new and piercing thought to Marise that, if Severance went home immediately and married his cousin, people would suppose she had been jilted. She, so sensitive to every breeze which blew praise or blame, ought to have realised that this would be the case.

Strange that it needed a blundering fellow like John Garth to point out the peril. The girl saw at once that it was a real one. She shrank from the prospect as from a lash. She could hear the "cats" who had already been "horrid" in England, and the cats awaiting their

chance to be horrid in New York, mewing with joy over this creamy dish of scandal.

"I told you how it would be! As soon as he got the title, and a little money with it, he threw her over!"

In a flash she saw a second motive for her marriage with Garth, if Severance were to marry Œnone Ionides. She must marry someone, and she hadn't the heart just now to pick and choose as, of course, she could do, given a little time. Prickling with shame over the explanation which she tried stumblingly to make, her impulse was to catch at the one Garth offered. Why not, since now that she thought of it, his point of view was hers? Pain would be saved for both. And she realised that she could not blurt out the naked truth in words. It seemed to her that, if she attempted to do so, this rude giant, this primitive man in New York "ready-mades," would kill her, as he had already suggested killing Severance.

"Then you consent?" she took him up.

"Consent? What do you think of me? Yes, I consent."

"Only to be friends? You understand that part?"

"I agree to that, to begin with. Because I'm so mad about you. I'd take you at any price."

"To 'begin with'?"

"Till I can make you care. I'm a man and you're a woman. And the rest may come. I'll chance it."

"No. You mustn't hope for that. It won't come. I don't want it to come."

"Hope isn't easy to kill. If it was, I guess the war wouldn't have ended the way it has. You don't know how I love you. Why, the thought even of calling you 'my wife' is—is a kind of glorious shell-shock."

He laughed out, shyly yet violently, like a boy: and

of a sudden Marise felt sick with guilt. "I mustn't let you be happy!" she cried.

"Why not? You needn't grudge me that. But you haven't named the day yet—Marise. Lord! The thrill it gives me to say 'Marise' to your face—the way I've been saying it behind your back."

"You make me feel—a little beast!" The words spoke themselves, straight out of her conscience. "I can't fix a time yet, because—if I'd explained to you properly you mightn't have decided as you have. And it's no use trying any more. I can't do it. Oh!" (as she saw his face flush again, and pale to a sickly brown) "perhaps I see what was in your head at first—what's come back there now. But I'm not so much of a beast as that. My wishing to marry someone has nothing to do with the past. No, the reason's all mixed up with the future. You could never guess. I could never explain. And I couldn't let you marry me unless everything had been explained. I thought for a minute I could—and I wanted to—but I find I'm not like that. Tony—Lord Severance—must explain. Yes, of course. When I've telephoned—no, written to him—he will do it. I haven't really spoken to him of you yet. He doesn't even know that—you care about me. If I make an appointment, will you call at the Waldorf, where he is staying?"

"No!" Garth exploded. "That I will not do. I'll see Severance, if you insist. I'll keep an appointment at any time. But it must be at my hotel. I'm damned if I'll call on him!"

CHAPTER XI

EVERY MAN HAS HIS PRICE

THE note Marise meant to write was not written; for, as the door of the suite shut behind John Garth, Mrs. Sorel came to the girl with news.

"Dear child, I promised you shouldn't be disturbed, whatever happened, but Tony has been telephoning for the sixth time to-day. Poor boy! He's very anxious about you. Don't look so cynical! If your face should ever settle into lines like that, your beauty would be gone! This time he wanted to know if you're better for your long sleep, and if you can see him."

"No, I can't, mother! Not till something's decided. I simply can't act to-night if I have to go through another scene with him."

"Oh, I'm not suggesting it, pet! I merely wanted to know what I should say to poor Tony. I told him that I'd call him up and give him his answer when you were free."

Marise started. "Did you say who was here with me?"

"Ye-es, I thought it would be best. I imagined you must be very sure the man was—the one we're in search of."

The girl shivered. "Marise in Search of a Husband! We never expected it would come to that with me, did we, Mums? But anyhow, I hadn't to search far. That's one consolation! I was snapped up the minute I appeared in the show window."

"Well, Tony was wrong about that Garth man, then!"

"Yes, he was wrong. I must write and let him know why Garth came—unless you told him why?"

"I said only what I dared say through the telephone. You know how careful I am of anything that concerns you. What I told him was, 'Major G——' (not even Garth!) 'has come to talk over that proposition you thought he wouldn't accept. His staying so long makes me fancy he may be accepting after all.' That is every word."

"Good! I shan't need to write! Please 'phone again, Mums, and explain that I don't feel as if I could see Tony till after the theatre. He may come to my dressing-room a few minutes then, if he likes. You can bring him in. I won't be alone with him for an instant! Tell him that I talked with Garth, who's inclined to accept. But I left it to him—Tony—to make matters clear, and he must telephone Garth for an appointment at the Belmore—not the Waldorf."

"Severance to go to Garth! He'll refuse——"

"Then the whole thing is off!" Marise threw out her arms in a gesture of exasperation. "He can take the offer or leave it."

Mary said no more, but flew to the 'phone in her own room, with the door shut between. Presently she came back. "Tony has consented," she announced. "Another proof of his great love!"

. . . . . .

Never had Lord Severance felt that he appeared to less advantage than when he was shown into the Bounder's sitting-room at the Belmore Hotel. He held himself very straight, however, and was every inch an Ancient Greek, if not an English earl.

Garth had been engaged in writing a letter and puffing smoke over it from a meerschaum pipe some shades browner than his face.

At sight of Severance, and the sound of his name deformed by a page-boy, the big man rose, topping his tall guest in height and erectness.

"Well?" was his only greeting, as the door closed. He pushed a box of cigarettes across the table. "Those are the smokes you prefer, I believe."

"Thanks. I have my own. And my own matches."

"All right." Garth continued to puff at his pipe.

"You have seen Miss Sorel, I understand."

"That is so."

"She—or rather Mrs. Sorel—'phoned me that—er—though you'd had some conversation, the—affair hadn't been entirely explained to you. That's as it should be. It's my business, and my place, to explain it."

"Fire away. Do you want to sit down?"

"I prefer to stand."

"My sentiments!"

Severance lit a cigarette, and took some time in the process.

"It's rather a long story," he drawled, not with a conscious desire to put on airs, but because his wasn't an easy task, with that bounder's yellow eyes pinning him down, never off his face for a second.

"I'm afraid, to make you understand and prevent your doing an injustice to Miss Sorel, I'll have to bore you, in beginning, with a short résumé of my personal history."

"Spit it out. Though you needn't fear my doing that lady an injustice. It would take something worse than a lack of tact on your part, or any man's, to make me such a fool."

"Glad you feel so about it."

"So am I. Shoot!"

Thus prodded without ceasing, Severance began the tale. He told about his half-uncle, and his half-uncle's daughter. Whether it was Œnone's state of invalidism or the state of her affections which drew from Garth a grunt of "Poor girl!" Tony was not sure. But, in the circumstances, the less notice he took of disturbing trifles the better. He stated his case with as much care as if he had been pleading in court, as his own defender. In fact, he had rehearsed some sentences hastily on his way from the Waldorf to the Belmore. Yet those eyes of Garth's were as disconcerting as the watchful eyes of an uncaged panther, alleged to be tame. Severance forgot the words he had thought of, and had to substitute others not so effective. With the most earnest wish to cut the best figure possible, for dear dignity's sake, he felt himself floundering more than once. At least, however, he did not break down. Somehow he got to his goal, and knew that even a boor like Garth could not fail to see what—if he took on the job—was required of him.

"So that's that!" Tony finished, and threw away his cigarette.

He had not been looking at the other man much as he talked. It was easier and pleasanter not to do so; but, despite Garth's silence (not once had he interrupted with a question or exclamation), Severance wasn't quite sure how this type of fellow would act in the circumstances.

Of course, the bare hint that he might accept such a part would be the last of insults to a proud man—a gentleman. Garth, however, was merely a "temporary gentleman," and probably hadn't saved a sou. To a

person of his sort, a million dollars would be a dazzling bribe. Still, the brute had an ugly temper, as he had shown once or twice in the past, and he was capable of violence. Tony was doubtful, still, how to take him. Common as the Bounder was, his brother officer had vaguely placed him a peg above this level. The black eyes made a sudden effort to dominate the yellow-grey ones and read their secret, in order—if need be—to ward away a blow.

But there was no such need, it seemed. Garth stood with feet apart, always doggedly puffing at his pipe, hands thrust deep in pockets. He had produced a cloud of smoke as dense as that which emanated from a Geni of the Lamp, and Severance could not pierce to his expression.

For a minute neither spoke. Then Garth brought forth from the depths a hand, removed the meerschaum from his mouth, and, having knocked out the ash, lovingly laid the pipe on the mantelpiece.

Severance stood alert, prepared for what might come. But nothing came.

"What did Miss Sorel say about me?" Garth bluntly questioned. "I mean yesterday or to-day."

"We have scarcely mentioned you when we were together. I told you it was her mother who telephoned me. There has been no other communication on the subject. I hope I've made it plain to you that Mrs. Sorel approves this plan."

"Plain as a pikestaff. She would approve of it, or any plan of yours. I should judge she's that kind of a person. She thinks her daughter born for the English aristocracy and millions. Then I'm to understand that the ladies gave you no reason for believing me the man —to take this on?"

"They went into no details. Miss Marks may have led them——"

"We can drop the subject. All I wanted to know is what they said, not what they thought. Well, a million dollars is quite a wad! And every man has his price. I'd do a lot for a million. But in this case——"

"Yes?"

"I ask you to raise your bid if you wish to buy yours truly."

"Oh, if it's a question of a few thousands——"

"It isn't. I'll take the rest of the payment in another medium. Not money. And I want it in advance."

"What d'you want?"

"You're a boxer, I believe?"

"Not bad."

"Heavy-weight, of course!"

"Yes."

"So am I. Jim Jackson trained me, and taught me most of what I know."

"Ah! I've heard of him."

"Most men have."

"What are you leading up to?"

"My advance payment for the job. I take it on only upon that one condition."

"I don't fully understand."

"Well, as I just said, a million's quite a wad, and I, like every man, have my price. Also, I've my pride. Now, you don't know the reasons I may have for deciding to pocket that pride at the same time with your millions. Take it that they're mercenary. What does it matter to you? But even a gilded pill slips down easier in jam. The jam I want is a round or two with you, man to man, no gloves. Now d'you understand?"

"You want to fight me?"

"A little round, I said. We ought to be pretty evenly matched."

"It seems to me a very childish idea," said Severance.

"May be it is. But it's my idea. And those are my terms. Refuse or accept."

Severance fingered his moustache in the way he had. "When do you want to do this damned fool thing, and in what circumstances?" he hedged.

"Now. Circumstances those of the present minute. We can take off our coats. I suppose you don't wear corsets?"

Severance deigned no answer to this taunt. He thought hard for an instant. He was a good boxer, and had been complimented before the war by Carpentier himself. Garth was unlikely to be his equal. If the ass wanted to work off steam and save his beastly face this silly way, let him!

"If I consent to fight, you consent to—er——"

"Yes, whether you or I get the best of this."

"Done, then!"

They tore off their coats, collars, neckties, and waistcoats. Garth had a sullen, ugly grin on his face as he pushed back the table and cleared the room. Severance did not know what to make of the man, but had confidence in himself.

. . . . . .

Two hours later the telephone-bell rang in Mrs. Sorel's room. She was putting on hat and coat to go to the theatre with Marise, but she ran to take up the receiver.

"Is that your voice, Lord Severance—Tony? Why, I wasn't sure at first," she answered an indistinct murmur at the other end. "You sound different, some-

how! What? You've had a fall? Loosened a front tooth? Oh, my poor dear boy—your beautiful white teeth! Marise will shed tears. Of course, you mustn't leave your rooms to-night. . . . Indeed, you must be sure he's the best dentist in New York. He'll fix you up in no time. . . . Why, yes, I suppose I can run in, without Marise, just for a minute . . . if it would comfort you at all. . . . The man Gar—said 'yes'? Well, that's a consolation! You settled the whole thing before your accident? But you'll tell me the story when I come."

. . . . . .

For the first time, Garth did not go to the theatre that night. Never had he felt more physically fit, but he did not wish to see Marise. He felt that he would not be master of himself, through her "great scene" in the last act. He would want to spring on the stage and choke her. As he thought this, he looked at his knuckles. They were cracked and bruised, but the sight did not displease him. He stretched out his arms wide in a sweeping gesture, his hands spread palm upwards.

"God!" he said. "I've got my chance. To punish him. To punish her, too. Why not? The devil knows how well she deserves it. And yet—I don't know. We shall see!"

CHAPTER XII

"HAVE YOUR CAKE AND EAT IT, TOO!"

WHILE two men thought violently of Marise Sorel, she lay in bed as night wore on, intent upon thinking of one of them, and inadvertently thinking of both.

Severance hadn't shown himself at the theatre because, thanks to Garth, he was not looking his best. Neither was Garth, who, on the contrary, looked and felt his worst. Unlike Severance, however, he had very little personal vanity; and a black eye or so would not have prevented him from going as usual to gaze at "Dolores." He did not go because he didn't wish to go.

Smoking pipe after pipe, he prowled up and down his own sitting-room far into the night, much to the annoyance of a lady on the floor below. He mapped out a future full of revenges; and if "thoughts were things," his must have hurled themselves like Mills bombs into Marise's room, to burst at the foot of her bed. He did not flatter himself that they would reach so far; yet possibly it was some disturbing telepathic influence which forced Marise to think of Garth as often as of Severance, almost as often as she thought of herself.

She thought with fury of Severance, with extraordinary curiosity of Garth, and with pitying forgiveness of herself.

Of course, she knew that she was behaving, or planning possibly to behave, in a way which should bow

her head with shame. Perhaps she was a little ashamed. At all events, she wouldn't have liked people to know what she contemplated doing, and with what motive. They might misunderstand. They might think her a bad lot, whereas she was not a bad lot, but a charming, cruelly-wounded girl who had to defend herself at almost any price.

Well, she wasn't claiming to be an *angel!* She'd hate to be one. It would be too dull. But she was just as far from being a "Vamp," or even a sort of up-to-date Becky Sharp. Becky Sharp had no heart. She, Marise, had too much. That was the trouble. She was hurt, hurt through and through! She'd go mad if she didn't do something desperate.

To marry this Garth man—actually *marry* him!—would be desperate enough. She'd said that she'd do it. She had—yes, actually proposed to him. But she could change her mind. Surely he wouldn't be surprised if she did. And if he were surprised it didn't matter, except that—he was such a strange sort of fellow, he might *kill* her! It was rather a wonder he hadn't killed Tony—or tried to. She would somehow have fancied he was that *sort!* But she must have been mistaken in him. Mums said that Tony'd said (through the 'phone) that Garth had accepted the promise of a million dollars for—for being what she'd herself invited him to be: her "dummy" husband.

What was his motive? Was it what she had actually believed: that he loved her so wildly he'd do *anything* to get her? Or was Tony right; had every man his price in hard cash?

Marise sat up in bed. She couldn't lie still!

"By Jove, I wouldn't do such a thing if I were a man!" she nobly felt. "Not if I loved a girl. I

wouldn't have her on such terms. Which is it with Garth?"

There it was again! She couldn't banish him from her thoughts. His big image blocked out that of Severance. But then, she wasn't curious concerning Severance. She knew all about his motives.

"I won't do the beastly thing!" she said out aloud, or almost aloud. If it had been quite, it might have brought Mums flying helpfully in from the next room, and Marise didn't want Mums at this moment. "I didn't mean it really, even at first."

Then she reminded herself that it wouldn't *kill* her if people did think that Lord Severance had jilted her. She needn't marry out of pique because of a nine days' wonder like that. She had had plenty of proposals (though nothing quite so exciting as Tony, perhaps), and she was bound to have plenty more. Some millionaire would come along—someone she could bring herself to tolerate as a real husband, and so break Tony's heart, as he deserved. Till one worth taking appeared, she would remain free.

As for the title—well, Mums had always cared more about that than she had, though, of course, it would be nice to marry an earl—especially such a unique sort of earl as Tony Severance.

As Mums said, "Tony *was* unique." He was so fearfully, frightfully good-looking. Such lots of girls wanted him. They had all envied her. If she lost him, they wouldn't envy her any more. They'd pity her. Ugh! They'd say, "Poor Marise Sorel thought she'd got him, but he slipped away and married his rich cousin."

This brought her down to bed-rock again. *Should*

she carry out the Plan, and make Tony hers in the end —which he vowed was very near?

There were quite a lot of earls; but none like Tony. She'd had, and would have, other chances. But not to touch Tony. There *wasn't* anything to touch Tony! And with all that money he'd talked about, he'd be a multi-millionaire. The whole world would be hers as his wife. Yet—there was "many a slip 'twixt cup and lip." Just supposing—oh well, she wouldn't think of it any more. It was maddening, agonising. She'd go to sleep and decide—*actually* decide—in the morning!

Marise flung herself down desperately, and burying her hot head in the cool pillows, she forced herself not to think.

. . . . . .

When she waked, it was with the sensation that something hateful had happened or was going to happen.

What was it? *Oh!* . . .

The girl remembered the horrid thing, and how she had decided to keep free and punish Tony. Or had she quite decided? Hadn't she put off deciding?

How dull as lead it would be to give up this tremendous adventure to which she'd impulsively pledged—*almost* pledged!—herself! It might be a shocking and repulsive thing to do if some people did it, but it wouldn't, of course, be so with her.

Lots of people had said that "Dolores" was a coarse, unpleasant part when Elsa Fortescue had played it, but no one had said such a word when she had taken it over. On the contrary!

As this thought passed through her badly aching head, Marise dimly realised that marriage with Major Garth—accepting him as a dummy husband, having to

fight him, perhaps; "seeing what he would do," whether he would try the old Claude Melnotte or Petruchio stuff, or whether he'd work up new business of his own —would be quite the most exacting emotional part for which she'd ever been cast.

Suddenly she saw how she could punish Tony severely, even though she fell in with his plans; how she could have that satisfaction, and at the same time the satisfaction of not losing him.

"It's like having your cake and eating it too!" she thought.

She *would* marry Garth. She'd marry him soon—*much* sooner than Tony meant—as soon as a license could be got. She'd send for Garth and tell him so. She'd say *she* knew no more about marriage licenses than dog licenses. That sounded rather smart! He must find out and arrange everything. The quicker the better. Tony shouldn't hear a thing about it till too late. Then he would be *sick!* And in this way *he* would seem to be the jilted one. Splendid! His trip to England would be torture. And she'd make it a little worse by flirting with Garth under his nose before he sailed!

It was scarcely light when she settled all this. Then she could hardly wait till it was time to get up.

Strange! To many people this would be a day like any other! To Céline, to Zélie Marks—ah, *Zélie Marks!*

The eyes of Marise flashed like blue stars in the dawn.

CHAPTER XIII

"CAN YOU KEEP A SECRET?"

MISS MARKS was punctual that morning, as usual.

She looked like a creature of moods and storms and sudden revolts, but her behaviour as a typist-stenographer belied her appearance as a woman. Not only was she always on time, but she was invariably correct in her deportment. Yes, "deportment" was the word! No other would have enough dignity to express Miss Marks.

As a rule, Mrs. Sorel came into the salon soon after the arrival of the secretary, leaving no idle interval after the preparation of paper, pencils, and sorting of letters. Zélie Marks remembered only one occasion when Miss Sorel had appeared before her mother. That was the day when she was anxious to find a certain letter in the bulky pile of correspondence, and make sure that no eye spied it save her own.

Zélie happened to be thinking of that affair to-day, when the door of Marise's bedroom opened and a Vision showed itself upon the threshold. "Good morning, Miss Marks," it said.

"Good morning, Miss Sorel," echoed its paid employée.

The said employée would not have been human had she never felt qualms of envy of the Vision. Sometimes it was merely a negative discomfort like a grumbling tooth that doesn't quite ache. Sometimes

it was sharply positive; and this was such a moment. Queer! Zélie always envied Marise most when she saw the girl in what Mrs. Sorel called "undress uniform."

There were few young women even among wage-earners who couldn't make a fairly brave show in a neat tailor gown or a "Sunday best" for Church Parade. But only the Truly Rich could have such heavenly "undies," and only the young and lovely—lovely of figure as well as of face—could look in them more thrilling than the wondrous wax ladies in shop windows, or the willowy dreams of line-artists in fashion magazines.

Zélie had never had, and felt that she never would have (though she was sure she *ought* to have!) such things as Marise Sorel wore in her bedroom. They were utterly absurd, almost indecent, she told herself. What could be more idiotic for cold weather than a pale pink, low-necked, short-sleeved chiffon nightgown, with the only solid thing about it a few embroidered wild roses! What more brainless than a *robe de chambre* of deeper pink silk georgette, trimmed with sable fur in all the places where fur couldn't possibly give warmth?

She, Zélie Marks, wore comfortable delaine night-dresses at this time of year, and wadded kimonos. She respected herself for her economy and good sense. But she wished she were Miss Sorel!

"Miss Marks," said Marise, "can you keep a secret?"

Zélie smiled. "In my work, I have to keep a good many."

"I suppose you do! Well, will you keep one for me?"

"Certainly."

"That's a promise! Now—I shall surprise you very much."

Zélie smiled politely, and waited.

"I'm—going to be married."

"Pardon me, Miss Sorel," said Zélie, in rather a stilted, professional manner, "but that doesn't surprise me at all."

"You haven't heard the name of the man yet."

"No. You haven't *told* me that."

"You mean, you believe you've guessed?"

"I hope you don't think me presumptuous?"

"Of course not! Why should it be—such a long word? Guessing's free! But I wonder if you *have* guessed?"

Zélie allowed herself to look slightly bored. If Miss Sorel were going to be married, and leave for England, she wouldn't want a secretary long, so there was no need to grovel! "Do you wish me to try?" she asked primly.

"Yes."

"The Earl of Severance."

Marise had known she would say that, yet she blushed. "Lord Severance and I are quite old pals," she replied. "This is something much newer and more exciting! I'm going to marry your friend Major Garth."

There were few warmer-hearted girls, few who hated more to give pain, than Marise, yet as she spoke she fixed her eyes—minx-like, if not lynx-like—on the face of Miss Marks. Even when she saw it go pale—that greenish pallor of olive complexions—and then a dull, unbecoming red which gave the dark eyes a bloodshot effect, she wasn't conscious of repentance for what she had done. She had an odd, unpleasant feeling that Miss Marks had no right to turn pale and red about a man

she was going to marry. So instead of softening, she went on, hard as nails.

"Don't forget it's a *great* secret. I want to spring a surprise on *everyone*. Will you please 'phone him—Major Garth—at the Belmore for me? I haven't got time now to call him myself. Just ask him to come round in three-quarters of an hour. I'll have had my coffee and be dressed by then, if I rush."

"Very well, Miss Sorel," agreed Zélie, controlling her voice. After which she added, "I hope you'll allow me to congratulate you."

Marise laughed a funny little laugh. "Thanks! But doesn't one 'wish joy' to the bride and '*congratulate*' the bridegroom?"

By this time Zélie was at the telephone, but she turned, and her black eyes darted at Marise one small flame of the fire in her heart. "I wish you joy, of course," she said. "But I *must* congratulate you too, because I've known Ja—Major Garth since before the war, and I know what he *is*. He's *great!* If you lumped together most of the best men you've met, they wouldn't make *one* John Garth!"

"Ha ha! he *is* very big!" giggled Marise. "Quite an out-size."

Zélie could have boxed the ears under the delicious boudoir cap. They deserved to be boxed!

"His *soul* is big!" the older girl snapped. "I only hope you—I mean, there aren't many women capable of appreciating him. But, of course, you must be, or you wouldn't have succumbed to him so soon."

"Succumbed!" Marise flung back the word with just the least shrug of her shoulders. For an instant the two glared at each other, though "glare" is a melodramatic word which doesn't chime well with nicely-

brought-up girls in the twentieth century. When Marise, as a child, had looked at anyone in that way, she called it "snorting with her eyes."

Now, it was only for a third of a second. Then Miss Marks applied herself to the telephone, and never had her neat back looked so square and business-like. There was no more time to waste upon useless repartees with a secretary, so Marise bolted to her own room.

She meant and wished to be dressed and fed in three-quarters of an hour, but never had she quite brought off that feat—at least, never since she'd become a successful star; and she didn't quite bring it off now. Her hair was being done when Mums tapped and entered upon the scene. She looked grave and rather worried, though she never actually frowned, for fear of wrinkles.

"That man Garth has come," she announced in a low voice. "What an hour for a call! Do you wish to see him?"

"I sent for him," Marise explained. "Didn't he tell you? Or haven't you spoken to him?"

"I have spoken to him, but he didn't tell me," said Mary Sorel. "I came into the salon, and there he was with Miss Marks. I was never so surprised in my life!"

"I don't see why, as you know perfectly well I'm going to marry him," returned Marise. "Oh, Céline! you've dug a hairpin about an *inch* into my head! Now mind, whatever you hear us say must go no further."

"But certainly not, Mademoiselle," vowed Céline, who spoke excellent English, though the two ladies loved proudly to air their French for her benefit. "It is

indeed true that Mademoiselle will marry this *Monsieur American?"*

"It is indeed true," Marise repeated drily.

"It won't take place—I mean the wedding—for some time, however," Mrs. Sorel hurried to add.

Marise said nothing, but looked suddenly as mulish as a beautiful girl can look. She had been wondering whether or no to confide in Mums what was in her mind, and see what Mums would say and think about it. But on the instant she decided *"No."* She *knew* beforehand what Mums would think and say. Everything would be from Tony's point of view. Mums was obsessed with the wonder and majesty and glory of the great—soon to be the rich—Lord Severance! The news should be sprung on Mums at the last moment, when everything was "fixed up."

Meanwhile, Zélie was snatching a few words with Garth—not the words she wanted personally to speak, but as nearly those as she dared.

"Jack Garth!" she whispered, "Miss Sorel told me just now you and she are going to be *married.* She wasn't *joking?"*

"I hope not," said Garth steadily, "because I'd be—rather cut up if I thought it was a joke."

"Listen, Jack," Zélie hurried on. "We're pals—we've been pals for a long time. I *want* you to be happy. I'd do a whole lot to make you happy. So you've just *got* to forgive me if I say . . . *Do* you know what you're doing? *Can* you be happy? That girl—I mean, Miss Sorel—doesn't love you any more than she does me. And that isn't a *little* bit!"

"I love her," said Garth. "I don't care a damn whether I'm happy or not."

"Oh! Then it's all right. Of course, I *suppose* you

know your own business. Still—Jack—I can't help feeling there's something queer—some sort of mystery. Don't let yourself be deceived."

"I'm not being deceived."

"I hope not, I'm sure. But—oh, *do* forgive me!—it's Lord Severance she loves."

"Then the sooner she unloves him the better it will be all around."

"I know you think I'm a meddler. But remember we're friends. Remember Mothereen told me to be your friend, Jack. Those two Sorel women think Severance the perfect beau ideal of a man. They look upon you—oh, I can't say it!"

"You needn't," Garth drily assured her; "I'm a cad; a bounder; a lout."

"The *beasts!* I hate them both!" Zélie gasped. "They're not worthy to black your boots."

"I mostly wear brown ones," said Garth.

"You're right to snub me. I won't say any more. You must go your own way, and I hope—I hope with all my heart" (Zélie choked a little) "you'll never regret it. But just this *one* thing let me beg you to do. Whatever they're up to, don't give them the chance to despise you. I mean, in little things. They *can't* in big! I saw the way they looked at—at your clothes Sunday afternoon, Jack. I could have *thrown* something at them!—not the clothes, but the Sorels—and Severance, the conceited Greek snob! But the clothes *weren't* right, boy. They didn't do you justice. They had a sort of 'Sunday-go-to-meeting' look: kind of *smug!* And your gloves and shoes *just* the wrong yellow! For heaven's sake don't lose a minute in going to a good tailor if you don't want your life to be a hell!"

Garth laughed out, a hard, spasmodic laugh; and at that instant Marise came in.

CHAPTER XIV

MARISE PUTS ON BLACK

A GIRL in love with one man, flinging herself at the head of another out of pique or something worse, should have been utterly careless how she appeared to the eyes of the latter. But for some reason —she hardly knew what—Marise had been anxious to look her most desirable. She was dressed in black velvet with shimmering fringes, and a drooping black velvet hat which made her fairness dazzling, her yellowish-brown hair bright gold.

With a faint smile, and in silence, she held out her hand. Garth took it, and this time didn't crush it unduly.

Zélie, who had risen as Garth rose, began pinning on her toque, but Marise turned to her. "Don't go, Miss Marks," she said. "I've told you the secret, and maybe we shall need your help about something. I don't want my mother here till everything's arranged. It doesn't matter about you."

Zélie slowly took out a hatpin. Oh no, it didn't matter about *her!* She laid the toque down again, but drew a chair to the typewriter table, her back turned to the man and the girl. She could, if she glanced up from her papers, however, see them both in a mirror. She tried not to glance up, but she succeeded about half as often as she failed. The look on Garth's face hurt a great deal worse than the hatpin had done when just now she had jammed the point of it into her head. Oh,

it was ridiculous—or heartbreaking—the way some men loved the wrong girls!

"I've been thinking in the night," said Marise in a brisk, cheerful tone, "what fun for us—since we *are* to be married—to get married at once and give everyone we know the surprise of their young lives! . . . What do you say?"

Garth had not expected this at all. In fact, when he'd been sent for at a very early hour, he expected to hear that Marise had "changed her mind." It was easy for her to ask "what he said," knowing that he could say only commonplaces before Zélie Marks; and he believed that Zélie had been invited to remain in the room for precisely this reason.

"I say, 'Great!' " He rose to the occasion, with the memory of Zélie's words and his own drumming through his head. "They despise you. Cad: bounder: lout!" "That's nice of you!—very!" cooed Marise, noticing how his jaw squared, and feeling the tide of her curiosity rise. (*Was* it love? Or *was* it the million?) "Well then, we'll just do the deed! How long does it take to get licenses and things?"

Garth kept himself firmly in hand. "Only as long as it takes to buy the license and notify a parson."

"That's what I hoped," said Marise. "I felt sure it was different here from England."

"Shall we—that is, would you care"—(Garth's mouth was dry)—"would you care to be married to-day?"

"Yes," the girl flashed back, "I would care to, if that suits you. Because, you see, I want it to be done and over before—*anybody knows*. Except my mother, of course. She won't like the idea one bit. But I'll make her come round."

"I see," said Garth. And he did see. He saw very clearly. But he could not understand, all in a moment like this, why she wanted to marry him without letting Severance know beforehand. It didn't *seem,* just on the face of it, a good sign for Severance. Still, he couldn't be sure. Women were supposed to be very subtle, and he'd never had much time even to try and analyse the strange creatures. Except Mothereen (he'd named her that because she was Irish), the little old woman who'd given him the only mothering he remembered, Garth had never got very near any woman's mentality. He braced himself, and asked, "How soon can you be ready?"

"In an hour—in *less* than an hour. As soon as I've told Mums," Marise spoke quickly and thickly, over a beating heart. Each moment excited her more and more. She felt herself the heroine of a thrilling drama—a drama where she had to play the star part without any rehearsals, and without ever having read further than the first scene of the first act. It might be a drama of "stunts," too—as the movie people said: dangerous stunts, where she might have to walk a tightrope with a deep drop underneath. But she wasn't afraid. She would not have thrown over the part now if some other easier one with the same ending had offered. She didn't recognise herself as she was today. But she did not care. It was all Tony's fault. Or perhaps a little Mums' fault too.

"And afterwards?" she heard Garth quietly asking.

"Oh! . . . Well, the first thing is the fun of surprising everyone. After that—well, I haven't exactly thought yet."

"You had better think," he said. "Much better."

Marise glanced at the back of Zélie's head, then met Miss Marks's eyes in the mirror.

"We'll talk it over presently with Mums. She's so *wise*—and always knows how to do the right thing." The "correct thing" would have been more apt an expression, but Marise wasn't thinking of the fine shades. She was thinking just then more of Zélie; and the thought of Zélie made her blush, she didn't quite see why!

"Miss Marks," she said, "I may want you by and by to take down several notes for me, letters to some of my most intimate friends, to be sent after—after the wedding. But at this particular instant I fancy there's nothing more for you to do, except—oh yes, do be *very* nice, and run down to the mail counter, or wherever in the hotel you can buy stamps."

As these instructions were being given, Zélie pencilled with incredible quickness a few words on a scrap of paper. This scrap she tucked up her sleeve, and a second or two later, as Garth opened the door for her to go out, she contrived to slip the paper into the hand on the knob.

"Now I'll call Mums," cried Marise, fearing to risk such a moment alone with this unclassified wild animal, soon to become her dummy husband. "Mums is not pleased, because I said I wanted a few words with you before she came in—though she'd be *much* crosser if she knew I'd let Miss Marks stay. You'll back me up with her, won't you, that my plan—*ours,* I mean—is the best?"

"I think," said Garth, "you don't need much backing from me with your mother, though if you do, I'll give it as well as I know how. But wait a second before

she comes. I have a superstition. I ask that you won't be married in black."

"Oh! But I chose this dress on purpose!" The words escaped before she'd stopped to think.

Garth didn't flush. He was past that. He needed all his blood at his heart. "I supposed you did," he said. "All the same, don't wear it."

"But it's such a pretty dress—and hat. They're new. I like them—better than anything I've got."

"*For this occasion!* I understand."

"Are you—being sarcastic?" Marise hesitated.

"No-o. Only sincere. Why did you want to wear black to be married—to me?"

"I—don't know." She stammered a little.

"Well then, if you don't know, change to another colour."

"Oh, I'm quite willing to do that if you make a point of it!"

The man's manner was so different from the other day, that Marise was less sure of his motives in taking her at the price. He spoke shortly and sharply now, like a military martinet, she decided. But he *wasn't* exactly "common." He wasn't even ordinary.

Her last words were at the door of her own room, and she whisked through, to find her mother. She thought how she should break the news. And she thought, also, what she should wear in place of the black dress. Should she put on grey—or heliotrope—"second mourning"? She would have liked to try this trick upon Garth. But the man was capable of making her take off one thing after the other, on pain of not being married to-day—which meant, not spiting Severance.

. . . . . .

Mrs. Sorel was flabbergasted.

She would not have used such a vulgar expression herself; but that is what she was.

She argued, she warned, she scolded, she besought. Severance would be furious. It would be a blow which his love might not survive. Tony had not dreamed of this marriage taking place with such—indecent haste!

"If you say much more it won't take place at all!" shrilled Marise, on the verge of hysterics, which (Mums knew from bitter experience) her twentieth-century child was not at all above having when thwarted, just like an early Edwardian.

While Marise was away, Garth opened the folded scrap of paper that Zélie Marks had slipped into his hand, and read the line she had pencilled.

"For *goodness'* sake don't be married in those awful best clothes of yours that you wore Sunday. Put on the uniform of the *Guards,* and look a regular man."

He was in no mood for laughing, yet he grinned. "And look a regular man!" . . . Girls were queer. As if it would matter to Marise what *he* wore! But—well, hang it, why shouldn't he make her notice him? She would do that if he turned up in uniform. And wasn't that what he wished to look in her eyes, "A regular man"?

He'd made up his mind to take Zélie's tip, when suddenly he remembered that Marise and he would not be married in church. They'd walk into some parson's parlour, and the knot would be tied there. He couldn't get into his uniform for a home-made affair like that.

Garth had gone no further than this when Marise came back, chaperoned by Mums.

"My mother makes one stipulation," he girl an-

nounced. "That the wedding shall be in a church. She's picked up English ideas, and thinks anything else 'hardly respectable.' Though I should have thought for that reason it would be more appropriate! However, *I* don't care. Do you?"

"Not a da—not a red cent," said Garth.

Two minutes later he had gone to buy a marriage license, engage the services of a clergyman—and a *church.*

Marise changed her dress. She would not wear white, like a *real* bride. That would be sacrilege, she said; and compromised by putting on her favourite blue. But it was the oldest dress she owned; and she had intended giving it to Céline.

The girl wished she were pale. But that could be arranged. And she was arranging it with powder when the bell of the telephone rang.

Mums flew to the instrument, tearfully drawing on her gloves.

Garth had called up, to give the name of the church and the hour fixed for the wedding. They must start at once.

CHAPTER XV

THE CHURCH DOOR

CÉLINE was a fervent admirer of Lord Severance. Half Greek, she had heard him called. To her he was wholly Greek: a Greek god. Indeed, he was miles handsomer than *"cet Apollon en marbre"* adorning a pedestal in the salon, which statue she tried to drape tastefully with climbing flowers each morning. His lordship's nose was much the same as Apollo's; so was his proud air of owning the world and not caring particularly about it: and to Céline's idea he had more to be proud of than a mere god who went naked.

Gods had no pockets, and Lord Severance had many, beautifully flat yet containing banknotes with which he was generous when nobody looked. Since she could not marry him, Céline wanted Mademoiselle to do so, for Mademoiselle was her *alter ego.* She shared Mademoiselle's glory and her dresses. She wished to be maid to a countess—a *chic* countess, as the wife of Milord Severance would be. It was desolating that Mademoiselle should throw everything over because of a silly quarrel (it must be a quarrel!) and fling herself away on a gawky giant whose clothes might have been made by a butcher!

Yes, it was easy to see that there had been an upheaval of some sort. Mademoiselle was not the same since Sunday afternoon, when this huge personage had arrived by appointment, and Céline had recalled seeing

him on shipboard. To be sure, Milord had come in later, and outstayed the Monsieur. But it was then the quarrel must have occurred, for Mademoiselle had been in a state unequalled even after the most trying dress rehearsals. Oh, it was a mystery—a mystery of the deepest blackness!

Céline moaned aloud, with a bleating noise, and gabbled *argot* as she tidied the belongings which Mademoiselle had flung everywhere.

"If I should call up Milord, how would that be?" she asked herself, and rushed to the 'phone.

Severance, as it happened, had been on the point of telephoning Mrs. Sorel, not daring to attempt direct communication with Marise. He had bad news and good news to give. The bad was that he must sail for England sooner than expected, in fact, on the following day, or perhaps not get a cabin for weeks.

The good news was that a friend had offered to lend him a wonderful house near Los Angeles for the next few months. He had spoken to a certain Lady Fytche (*née* Adêla Moyle, of California) about his marriage, and bringing Œnone across for her health. Whereupon Adêla (who was at his hotel, and sailing on his ship) said, "I'd love to lend you Bell Towers. The house is standing empty, and you know it's rather nice."

Severance did know, for Bell Towers was a famous place, illustrated in magazines; and if Adêla Moyle had been prettier, it might have become his own before she fell back—figuratively speaking—upon a baronet.

If Marise would give up the stage (he couldn't bear to leave her behind the footlights in New York, admired, interviewed, gossipped about by Tom, Dick and Harry!), he'd lend Bell Towers to Mrs. Sorel, and the girl could vanish from public view till time for her

farcical marriage and his own return. If his uncle could be told by himself and the newspapers that Miss Sorel was *engaged* to Major Garth, it would be enough to cool the old boy's suspicions.

Then, as Tony's hand was stretched out for the receiver, came a ring at the telephone.

"The dentist!" he thought. For he had had to ask for a second appointment because of that loosened tooth, and was to be called up. It came as a surprise, therefore, to hear Céline's voice.

He could hardly believe the news which the French maid gave him. Marise wouldn't do such a thing! There must be a mistake, he told Céline. Or it was a clumsy joke.

"Milord, c'est la verité," came the answer. "Milord need not take my word. Let him go to the church. Milord may yet be in time. But he must make haste. It is a long way. I heard Madame telephone and talk."

"I will go—I'll do my best," Severance answered, to put the woman off. But—what *could* he do? What was his "best"?

Céline knew nothing of the secret pact. She judged from what she had overheard, and he could not explain that he didn't see his way to stop the marriage.

The more he thought, the more clear it became that this sudden move by Marise was a caprice to spite him —to "hoist him from his own petard." Severance could almost hear the gird defend herself. "You ought to be pleased that I took you at your word, before you went away. Otherwise I might have changed my mind about the whole thing!"

She was sure to say this, and even if he reached the church in time he wouldn't dare stop the business when

it had gone so far. That devil Garth had a beast of a temper; and a fellow can't at the same moment see red, and which side his bread is buttered!

Severance hated Garth venomously since the episode at the Belmore. But the brute was a hero in the States, and would pass in the public eye as a reasonable husband for Marise Sorel.

Nobody who didn't know the ugly truth would say, "How *could* that beautiful girl throw herself away on that *worm?*"

Whatever Garth was, he wasn't a worm. Though he had apparently made no bones of accepting a million-dollar bribe, deep within his subconscious self Severance didn't believe that the million was the lure. Garth was in love with the girl, in his loutish way. Perhaps, even, he might hope to win some affection from her in return. Tony felt that he need wish the fool no worse than an attempt to "try it on"!

Force, Severance did not fear. Marise was no flapper. She had her eyes open. She'd know how to handle a man in Garth's position. Besides, Mums would be at her side, a pillar of strength. Tony even felt that in some ways Garth was ideal for the part he had to play. Marise would always contrast him unfavourably with the man she loved. And hating Garth, he—Severance—could enjoy the tortures which the paid dummy was doomed to suffer.

Severance could not keep away from the church. To go was undignified, yet he knew that he would go. . . . Five minutes after his talk with Céline, Tony was in the lift, descending ten storeys of his hotel to the gilding and marble of the ground floor. As in a dream, he ordered a taxi. It came; and—self-conscious, as if he were being married himself—he directed the chauffeur

where to drive. Then, still as in a dream, he stared at his reflection in a small mirror, which bobbed as the taxi bounced. It was a consolation to see how handsome and superlatively smart he looked!

He had abandoned his uniform in New York for everyday life; but he was sure that no man in America had clothes to compare in cut with his, which had been built at just the right place in Savile Row. His silk hat was a masterpiece. His tie, his socks, and the orchid in his buttonhole were all of the same shade, and his opal pin repeated the lights and shades of colour.

Well, there was one good thing he *could* accomplish by turning up at the church. Silently he would show Marise the contrast between a man who was everything he ought to be, and a man who was everything no man should be and live!

The chauffeur slowed at last before a church which looked more English than American, and was perhaps a relic of colonial days. "You can wait," said Severance, getting out. "I may . . ." But he forgot the rest. In the porch stood two men, who had evidently just arrived and were talking. It was more like a dream than ever to see a familiar uniform which at a glance took Severance home. Both men wore it. The fighting khaki of his own regiment of the Guards!

The shorter of the two tall officers turned and saw him. It was his own Colonel; and the other was Garth. Then a second taxi drove up, containing Marise Sorel and her mother.

Severance would have stepped to the door of their cab, but Garth was before him.

And so it was, with sunshine striking a line of decorations on the V.C.'s breast, that Marise got the contrast

between the men. An orchid is beautiful; but the Victoria Cross, even expressed in ribbon, is better.

"Let me introduce my Colonel, Lord Pobblebrook," said Garth. "He has brought his wife, who is American, home to this country; and when we ran across each other this morning he offered to—to see me through here."

"Pobbles"—of whom Marise had heard from Tony—took her hand. "We're proud of Garth in the regiment," he said, and found time to nod to Severance. But he looked puzzled. Why was Severance here? To the best of Pobbles's recollection, Tony had been the ringleader in a set who wanted to snub Garth out of the Brigade. The Colonel's curiosity woke up.

CHAPTER XVI

FOR BETTER, FOR WORSE

FOR once, Marise was all girl, not actress. She lost her *savoir faire* at sight of Severance, and could not speak.

She saw him before she saw Garth and "Pobbles," and her eyes took in his perfection of tailorhood. Then Garth came forward, and she was struck with surprise by the uniform of the smartest soldiers in the world.

"What an inspiration!" she thought, never guessing whence that inspiration had come.

Mrs. Sorel, luckily, could always speak, even chatter. She chattered now.

"How nice of you to come, Lord Severance," she chirped, keeping up appearances before Lord Pobblebrook. "And how *clever!*" she added, camouflaging for "Pobbles's" benefit her surprise that Tony should have learned Marise's secret. How he had done that, she would wring out of someone by and by. But at present duty bade her be pleasant to "Pobbles."

Trying to recall mutual friends (titled) with whose Christian names she could impress the noble soldier, Mums had to keep a watchful eye and ear for her girl and the two young men: but it was not for long. The clergyman was waiting.

"Strange, how many things you can think of at one time—especially the wrong time!" Marise reflected, as she stood before the figure in a surplice.

She had often dreamed of being married, and what

kind of a wedding she would have, at St. George's, Hanover Square, or the Guards' Chapel. She had chosen her music, and knew what sort of dress and veil she wanted. Orchids were Tony's flowers. There was a white variety, streaked with silver. Her train should be silver, too. She'd be leaving the stage; and as the Countess of Severance, she could be presented. The silver train would do for Court.

Now, here she was, thousands of miles from Hanover Square and the Guards' Chapel. She had on a street dress. There was no music, unless you could count the far-off strains of a hand-organ playing an old tune, "You made me love you, I didn't want to do it!" The one orchid was in Tony's buttonhole; and he was in a pew looking on while she promised to love, honour and obey another man.

Marise saw the two pictures—the dream and the reality; and the difference made her sick. All the sense of wild adventure was gone. There was *no* adventure! There was just blank ruin.

What a fool she had been! Was there no way out, even now? Surely there was one. She could still say "No," instead of "Yes," and there'd be an end, where Garth was concerned.

Perhaps on the spur of the moment Marise would have followed her impulse, if—Lord Pobblebrook hadn't been present. Somehow, before him she couldn't make a scene!

The girl felt as if two unseen influences had her by the arm, one on the right, one on the left, like the white and black angels of the Mohammedan. They pulled both ways at once, and trembling as she never had trembled on a first night at the theatre, she looked up at Garth.

There was an odd expression in his yellow-grey eyes, which she had likened to the eyes of a lion in a Zoo who sees nothing save his far-off desert. This lion was not now thinking of the desert. He was thinking of her. But how? As a piece of meat which he would soon be free to devour? Or—as a new keeper who, though young and a woman, would have to be reckoned with?

As this question flashed through her mind, Marise remembered that she knew nothing of Garth's past, nor of his character, except that he had fought and won the V.C., therefore he must be brave. But why worry, since in a few months they'd part, and she would forget him, as she'd forgotten several leading men who played "opposite" her when she first went on the stage?

But that look in the yellow-grey eyes; what was its language? What was in the soul or brain behind the eyes? Was Garth deciding how to treat her during the short time that would be his?

Marise recalled the sound of his voice when he had asked her what would come after the marriage. She'd answered that she "hadn't thought yet." And he had said, *"You had better think. Think now."*

"Well, I'm not alone in the world, and I'm not afraid of him," she encouraged herself. "Cave Man business is old stuff. And anyhow—what price a Cave *Girl?"*

The vision of a Cave Girl downing a surprised Cave Man almost made Marise laugh; and then it was time for the ring. Good gracious, the *ring!* Of course, no one had thought of it!

There was an instant's stage-wait. Marise's eyes turned to her mother and saw Mums tearing off a glove to supply the necessary object. Far more dramatic, Severance had jumped up and was pulling from the least finger of his left hand a gold snake-ring which

had been made for his mother in Athens. Yes, he would *love* to have Marise married to Garth with that! But, after all, the bridegroom had brought the ring. It was only that for a few seconds he had forgotten. Perhaps the look he had exchanged with his bride had made him forget!

He remembered, however, before Mums or Severance could step into the breach. In fact, he gave them no breach to step into.

"With this ring I thee wed, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow," Marise heard him repeat, as he slipped over the third finger of her left hand the circlet retrieved in haste from his khaki tunic. She glanced at the ring as it slid loosely on, and was amazed to see what such an outsider had chosen.

The "smart thing" in London and New York was, not to have the "stodgy old curtain-ring" which had been woman's badge of subjection for centuries. Instead, the idea was a band of platinum set round with diamonds; and this was what Garth had hit upon!

While Marise was on her knees—shamefaced because there was nothing she dared pray about—she thought of the ring, and wondered who on earth had put Garth up to getting it?

. . . . . .

When all was over, and the words which should be momentous were spoken, "I pronounce you man and wife," the girl lifted her face with the hardest expression it had ever worn. Eyes and lips said, "This is where the bridegroom kisses the bride. But that's not in *our* programme. Don't dare to take advantage of your Colonel being here."

Whether Garth read the signal, or whether he'd no intention of keeping the time-honoured custom, he

refrained. Instead of a kiss, he gave the bride a slight smile, gone so quickly she wondered if she'd imagined it.

In another moment, after she'd been pressed in her mother's arms, Lord Pobblebrook was shaking hands; and then came Severance.

It was a good minute for him, because Garth was kept busy by a kind Colonel and a not very kind mother-in-law.

"Let no man put them asunder!" the Reverend David Jones had just said, but there already was the man who intended, in the devil's good time, to disobey that command.

"This has been the worst half-hour of my life," Tony groaned. "My God, how I've suffered! I all but sprang up and yelled 'Stop!' when the fool looked round for someone to say why the marriage shouldn't take place——"

"'Or else *for ever after* hold his peace,'" quoted Marise.

"Dash it all, don't rub things in," Severance begged. "I didn't know how bad it would be——"

"I half thought you *might* spring up!" the girl confessed.

"If I had, what would you have done?"

"I—don't know."

"It would have made matters worse for the future—more difficult all round," Tony said. "That thought held me back. But, Marise, it was cruel to spring this surprise on me."

"It doesn't seem to have been a surprise," she reminded him. "How *did* you know about it—the church, and everything?"

"A little bird told me. Why did you want to hurt me so?"

Marise shrugged her shoulders. "You had hurt me—almost to death. I *had* to strike back! But let's not talk of it any more. The thing's done—and can't be undone."

"It can, and will be, before long, please Heaven!"

The girl laughed. "Please *Heaven?*" And she was glad when Pobbles broke in, Mums at his side.

"My dear young lady, Garth confided in me (am I not his Colonel, which is much the same as a father confessor?) that this—er—this little show had been got up in a hurry for one reason or other. I'm pleased and honoured to be in at the dea—I mean the birth—er—you *know* what I mean! And I'd be still more pleased if—er—couldn't we—I—invite you all to some sort of blow-out? My wife——"

"Sweet of you, Lord Pobblebrook!" cut in Mrs. Sorel. "But if there'd been time for any sort of rejoicing, any little feast, I should be giving it and asking Lady Pobblebrook and yourself to join us. But I suppose Major Garth can't quite have made it clear to you that he is called away suddenly—on a sort of *mission.* That's why the marriage was so rushed. He has to go at once, so he wanted to be married first, and——"

"Take my wife with me," explained Garth.

His mother-in-law of ten minutes stared at him with the eyes of a cold, boiled fish.

"Of course—yes—that's what he *wanted,*" she smiled to Pobbles. "What a pity it can't be! My daughter, Lord Pobblebrook, is a servant of the public, you know. She has to obey them, marriage or no marriage. And they want her in New York."

"Not as much as I want her out West," said Garth. He smiled again—that same queer smile with the same

unreadable look in his eyes, though this time both were for Mums.

The indignant lady turned to Marise, in case there were some plot against her; but the girl gave a very slight shake of her head. Light came back to Mrs. Sorel's eyes. She ought to be able to trust her own daughter!

"I took the liberty of ordering lunch for four at the Ritz after I met my Colonel in the hall of the Belmore," said Garth. "I stopped on the way there, to buy the ring. But"—and he eyed Severance coolly—"there will be room to have a fifth plate laid, if—er——"

"Oh!" thought Marise. "Not so much Cave Man, after all, as the Strong, Silent Man! All right! I know *that* kind from A to Z. And I dare say it's just as easy to be a Strong, Silent Girl as to be a Cave Girl, if once you begin properly."

Her sense of adventure woke again as she waited to hear Tony's answer.

CHAPTER XVII

THE SPEAKING-TUBE

SEVERANCE accepted the invitation to the Ritz. His principal reason for doing so was because he knew it would enrage Garth.

It was a strange and strained luncheon, for those present (with the exception of "Pobbles") talked very little and thought so much that it seemed to each one as if his or her thoughts shrieked aloud or shot from the head in streaks of blue lightning.

Marise thought, "What comes next? What does *He* mean to do?" And "He," with a capital "H," was no longer Severance, but this stranger, Garth.

Mrs. Sorel thought, "How *are* we going to get rid of the man? I'm sure he means mischief. Shall I appeal to Lord Severance, or would that make matters worse?"

Severance thought, "How am I to get some time alone with Marise, and come to an understanding before I sail to-morrow morning? How are we to arrange about our *letters and cables?*"

And Garth thought, "What will She say when she finds out what I've arranged at the Plaza?"

As for Lord Pobblebrook, he had only vague, pleasant thoughts such as men of his type do have at a wedding luncheon with plenty of champagne. It was a very good luncheon, for they do things well at the Ritz, and the champagne was a last song of glory before America went "dry."

At last, when Severance had to give up hope of a whispered word with Marise, he was obliged to declare his hand. "I'll call at the theatre to-night to say good-bye if you don't mind," he announced aloud, with a casual air. "I suppose you won't hand things over to your understudy, in spite of what's happened to-day?"

"I shall play to-night, of course," said Marise.

"And every night," added Mums.

Silence followed her words.

"Won't you come back to the Plaza with us, Lord Pobblebrook?" asked Mrs. Sorel. "If you have never been there, I'd like you to see what a charming hotel it is. Next time you run over from dear England, you might like to try it for yourself. Major Garth, I'm sorry to say, is obliged to attend to business this afternoon—business concerned with his *mission,* so unfortunately—unless you'll go with us—my daughter and I will be obliged to taxi back alone."

"Of course I'll come, with pleasure!" heartily consented Pobbles.

"My business doesn't begin quite so early," said Garth. "If you'll drive with Mrs. Sorel, sir, I'll take my wife as far as the Plaza."

If Mums could have stabbed her son-in-law, not fatally but painfully, with a stiletto-flash from her eyes, it would have given her infinite satisfaction to do so. As she could not, she had to confess herself worsted for the moment; for Lord Pobblebrook was the Colonel of Lord Severance as well as of Major Garth; and it was for such as he that the conventional farce of this wedding had taken place. He must not be allowed to suspect that anything was wrong, or Tony's whole elaborate scheme might be wrecked. It was most probable

that Lord Pobblebrook and Mr. Ionides belonged to some of the same London clubs and met now and then.

Marise was oddly dazed at finding herself alone in a taxi with Garth, bound for the Plaza Hotel, which she thought of as "home." She had expected that Tony or Mums would succeed in rescuing her, but neither had risen to the occasion: and the girl realised that this lack of initiative on their part was due to the presence of Pobbles. She hardly knew whether to be more vexed or amused at Garth's triumph (she supposed that he considered it such); but her lips twitched with that fatal sense of humour which Mums so disapproved.

"It is rather funny, isn't it?" said her companion.

Marise stiffened. This was a critical moment. Much depended upon the start she made on stepping over the threshold of this strange situation. She must be careful to keep the whip hand.

"What I was laughing at is funny, in a way," she grudged. "It occurred to me that it was smart of you to bring your Colonel to—to—the—er——"

"Show," suggested Garth.

"If you like to call it that."

"I thought the word pretty well described it from your point of view," explained Garth.

Marise looked straight at him.

"What was it from yours? It can't have been much more."

"I don't feel bound to tell you what it was from mine."

"Oh, well, you needn't!" Her chin went up. "I'm not really curious."

"Why should you be? You'll find out in time."

A spark lit the blue eyes under the blue hat.

"I do hope you're not planning to spring any sur-

prises on me, Major Garth," she said, in an acid tone that was a youthful copy of Mums, "because, if you are, it will only lead to unpleasantness. Whereas, if you keep to the spirit of the bargain, we——"

"Allow me to point out," Garth cut in, with an impersonal air of detachment which puzzled her, "that you yourself have 'queered' the 'bargain.' "

"I don't know what you mean," exclaimed Marise.

"That's another instance of your not thinking things out beforehand," he said. "If you'd stopped to reflect a minute before you proposed to marry me this morning, you'd have seen what you were up against."

Marise felt the blood rush to her cheeks, as if the man had slapped them with the flat of his big hand.

"What a way of putting it!" she flashed at him. "You may be a hero and all that—no doubt you are, as you're a V.C. But as a man—a *gentleman*—I'm afraid you've got quite a lot to learn."

"Of course I have," said Garth. "You knew I was only a temporary gentleman. I heard Severance state the fact to you on shipboard when he was telling you some of my other disadvantages. Scratch a temporary gentleman, and under the surface you find——"

"What?" Marise threw into a pause.

"The things you'll find in me, when you know me better."

"Oh!" she breathed. And on second thoughts added, "I don't intend to 'scratch' you, and find things under the surface. I don't suppose I shall ever know you much better."

"Call it worse, then," he suggested.

"Neither better, nor worse!"

"Yet you've just promised to take me for both."

"That meant nothing, as you know very well."

"I do not know anything of the sort."

"Then you *are* a 'temporary gentleman' indeed! We spoke just now of that bargain——"

"Which, through your own actions, doesn't exist."

"Of course it exists. You talk in riddles!"

"When you put your mind to this one, it will cease to be a riddle. You'll guess it in a moment. You'll see what you've done. Probably Severance would have told you before this if he'd had the chance. The explanation, if there has to be one, will come better from him than from me. But I may as well break one small detail to you before we get to the hotel; I've no intention of leaving him alone with you for a minute, or any part of a minute, before he sails."

"How dare you hope to lay down the law for me?" Marise almost gasped, over a wildly-throbbing heart. "I shall see Lord Severance alone as much as I choose —and as he chooses."

"You can try," said Garth. "So can he."

"*You* won't have any chance to prevent it! You shan't even come into my mother's suite at the Plaza Hotel if you attempt to put on these ridiculous airs of being my master. I wonder who you think you *are,* Major Garth?"

"The important thing—to you and your mother and to Severance—is not so much what I think I am, as what other people will think I am. They will think I'm your husband. I understand that this marriage idea was entirely for appearance' sake?"

"Exactly!" cried Marise.

"Then it's up to you and me to look after the appearances. I warned you this morning that you hadn't thought the thing out enough, and that you'd better

think hard, then and there. Perhaps you did. If so, you——"

"I didn't. How could I? There was no time."

"That's what you said. Consequently I had to do the thinking for you. And the arranging of your future. I never was a slow chap. My life was always more or less of a hustle since I was a very small kid, and I had to keep my thinking machine on the jump. The war has speeded it up a bit. This morning, when you announced that you'd be ready to be married in an hour or less, I'll tell you just what I had to do. I had to inform the manager of your hotel that I was marrying Miss Sorel, and that we couldn't get away from New York for a few days——"

"You—dared to do that!"

"I got my V.C. for doing something almost as dangerous. I told him he must give us a suite——"

"You—you *devil!*"

"Thank you. I guess even that sounds more natural from a wife to a husband than 'Major Garth.'"

"You don't dream I'm going to occupy a suite with you, I suppose?"

"I don't dream. I know you are going to occupy that suite, unless you want me openly to leave you on our wedding day. This comes of your not thinking what would happen next. You'd better choose now, because we'll soon be at the Plaza. Is it to be my hotel or not?"

"You said—when my mother explained to Lord Pobblebrook that you had a mission—you said you were going West."

"And that I intended to take you with me. But that won't be for a few days, till you've had time to settle your affairs. I don't want to rush you. What I

ask you to decide now is for meanwhile, before we start."

"I shall never start anywhere with you—or live anywhere meanwhile with you."

"Very well then, that's that. Now I know where I am." He seized the speaking-tube, but Marise caught his hand.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Stop the taxi and get out. The snap's off."

The girl was about to exclaim, "But you can't leave me like this!" when it occurred to her that, desperado as he was turning out, it would be well to take him at his word; at all events, to a certain extent.

"Very well," she said. "I shall tell everyone that you've gone West on an important mission. V.C.'s are always expected to have missions."

"And I shall tell everyone that I've done nothing of the sort. I'll go back to the Belmore, 'phone to the Plaza and countermand the suite I took, and allow myself to be interviewed by all the reporters, who'll swarm round me like flies round a honeypot. There'll be plenty of flies left for you. You can give them honey or vinegar, I don't care which. It's your concern, not mine. I don't even care what they make of the combination: my story and yours. It'll be *some* story, though. That's the one thing sure."

"You're an absolute brute!" cried Marise.

"What did you expect? You heard from Severance that I was a bounder. I'm a fighting man. That's about all, for the moment."

"You mean, you're fighting me?"

"Not in the least. I'm fighting the battle of appearances, which means I'm fighting *for* you."

"What makes you think there'll be reporters wait-

ing?" Marise changed the subject. "Did you tell anyone?"

"The manager of your hotel and mine. I didn't tell him in confidence. There was no idea of keeping the marriage a secret, was there?"

"No-o."

"Well, then! Am I or am I not to stop the taxi and get out?"

"Wait," Marise temporised. "You must please understand that I'm not going to live with you as your wife."

"I haven't asked you to do so, although you did ask me to become your husband. After last Sunday, I would never have started the subject, or even have tried to meet you again. Please, on your part, understand that."

The girl's breath was caught away for the dozenth time. She spoke more quietly. "I know you haven't asked me, in so many words," she admitted. "But you spoke of a *suite*."

"Certainly I spoke of a suite. I thought you and your mother were anxious to keep up conventions. Though I'm not Severance's sort of gentleman—perhaps *because* I'm not—you can trust me not to behave like a brute, even though you're thinking that I speak like one. Or, if you can't trust me as far as that, you ought never to have run the risk you have run."

"But can I trust you—to keep to the bargain?"

"I've told you that owing to your own act, there *is* no bargain. Haven't you solved that 'puzzle' yet?"

"I have not."

"You will soon. Do I stop here?"

"Bargain or no bargain then, *can* I trust you?"

"Look me in the face and judge."

She looked him in the face.

In spite of the war tan, not faded yet, he was pale; and his pupils seemed to have flowed like ink over the yellow-grey iris. His eyes were black as they blazed into hers. He might, she thought, commit murder in that mood, but—he could do nothing mean, nothing sly, nothing vile.

"I must trust you, and I do."

Garth let the speaking-tube fall.

CHAPTER XVIII

AU REVOIR—TILL SOMETIME!

WHEN Marise and Garth arrived together in Mrs. Sorel's salon, it was to find a "bunch" of reporters interviewing the bride's mother.

Marise guessed that Mums had had the young men up in order to tell them what she chose about Major Garth's future movements before Garth had time to arrive and speak for himself. But by these tactics she had lost the supporting presence of Lord Severance. Fearing his uncle, and perhaps even detectives set to spy upon him by Constantine Ionides, the last thing he could afford was to have his name appear in print in connection with this surprise wedding. Fearing reporters, he had not even come to the hotel door with Mrs. Sorel, but had gone with his Colonel to pay respects due to Lady Pobblebrook; and this was well, for some sharp eye and stylo would have spotted him even in the background of a taxi.

Mums had not only approved, she had advised this prudence. Everything depended upon it, in fact; and she had soothed Tony by assuring him that she and Marise—or she alone—could deal with Garth if Garth were uppish and needed keeping in his place. It was arranged between Mrs. Sorel and Lord Severance that the latter should come to "Dolores's" dressing-room at the theatre to say good-bye, and Mums would see that he got a few minutes at least alone with Marise. Then,

in a few weeks he would be back and they would meet again. Mrs. Sorel had provisionally accepted the loan of Bell Towers until he and Œnone should want the house for themselves, whereupon the Sorels could gracefully retire to some charming place they would hope to find in the neighbourhood.

Of course, this acceptance of Bell Towers must depend upon Marise leaving the stage: but Mums said that, if Tony were indeed shortly to be left a widower, the sooner Marise could be disassociated from the theatre, the better it would be for all concerned.

Thus it happened that when "Major and Mrs. Garth" walked into the room a few minutes after Mums' arrival, they found her as busy with a crowd of reporters as a conjurer who keeps a dozen oranges in the air at once.

Mary Sorel was chagrined at sight of her son-in-law.

Not that she thought of him as such, or as the husband of her daughter. She was a woman whom circumstances had forced to become unscrupulous. Ever since Marise had begun, as a flapper, to show signs of unusual beauty and talent, Mums had buckled on a steely armour in which to fight the world for her girl. Naturally conventional, she had adjusted a nice balance between ambition and conscience. When she was obliged to do a thing in itself objectionable, she hastily gilded it for her own benefit as well as that of Marise, seeing it as she wished it to be. Garth in her eyes, therefore, was no more important than one of the leading men with whom Marise played her star parts; and as—like a leading man—he was to be well paid, he would have no right to obtrude upon the star's private life.

She intended that, no matter how he protested, he should immediately be "called away"; and she had

hoped to get just what she wanted scribbled into the note-books of these reporters before Garth could interfere. Without feeling in the least guilty, therefore, she was upset when he had the bad taste to stalk in with Marise.

"Hello, boys!" he breezily greeted the newspaper men, some of whom he had met before.

They were delighted to see him, as well as Marise, and Mrs. Sorel's painstaking work went by the board in a minute. With rage and anguish she heard Garth say that when he "went West" (no longer in the sad vernacular of soldiers) his wife would go with him.

"She'll be leaving the stage, you know, as soon as she can manage to get free," he explained. "And then I'm going to take her out to my adopted state, Arizona."

His mother-in-law's interpolations that "it must be a long time first" were scarcely heard; and all her "exclusive information" was hurriedly blue-pencilled by the newspaper men. In the midst of this (to her) extremely painful scene, Sheridan and Belloc, author and manager, burst in like a couple of bombs. They had heard the news, and dashed to the Plaza in search of the truth.

"Well, I suppose we ought to congratulate you and all that," grumbled Belloc, when his worst fears had been confirmed by the sight of Garth, well known from journalistic snapshots. "We might have suspected something was in the wind, the way you've been an every-nighter for the 'Spring Song,' Major. But safety first!—and we can't be polite till we're out of the woods. You're not going to tear Miss Sorel away from us, of course, in the midst of the run?"

"Miss Sorel has ceased to exist, hasn't she?" asked Garth, with a rather glum smile.

"Not ceased to exist professionally." Belloc explained his meaning to the lay mind. "And I hope she won't cease for many years."

"If I can answer for her, she'll do no more acting after she's handed in her notice to you—two weeks, I suppose, like most contracts," Garth returned. "It's hard on you, in the middle of a run. But didn't I see in some Sunday supplement a photo of a beautiful young lady, labelled 'Miss Sorel's Understudy'? And as you say 'safety first!'—naturally I put my own safety before yours."

"As if anyone would go to the 'Spring Song' to see Marise's understudy!" broke out Mrs. Sorel.

"Well, in *my* 'Spring Song' there's no understudy to take her part. She has to play it herself," retorted Garth. "But I leave the decision to her."

As he spoke he looked straight at Marise—a warning look, as she read it. The thought of his threat was sharp as the point of a knife, pricking a painful reminder into her breast.

The girl could hear every word he had said to her in the taxi between church and hotel—hear the whole conversation as though it were being repeated by a gramophone. If she ventured to promise Belloc and Sheridan now that she would stay on in spite of her marriage, this big, uncompromising fellow would turn his back on her, giving to the public some garbled story of the desertion, a story which would shame her and ruin Tony's plans. She could have stamped her foot and burst into tears, as the emotional Spanish "Dolores" had to do in one scene of the play: but the reporters were all eyes and ears, and would simply "eat" an exhibition of the

star's fury with her brand-new bridegroom. Oh, she was at the beast's mercy in this first round of their fight —and well he must know it, or he'd not dare give her such a lead!

"Of course Marise wouldn't leave two old friends in the lurch at a fortnight's notice," Mrs. Sorel gave her ultimatum. "This is only a joke of Major Garth's."

"No, Mums, I'm afraid it isn't," said the girl, her cheeks hot, her eyes filling with tears. "We—we were talking things over in the taxi just now, and—and—well anyhow there's a fortnight to get Susanne Neville into shape as Dolores before I have to—go. She's so clever and pretty, I shall probably be jealous as a cat of the hit she makes in 'Dolores.'"

Mrs. Sorel was stricken dumb for once. Not that she intended to let things fall to pieces in any such way; but she was sure Marise wouldn't pronounce what sounded like her own doom without reason. Mums would have it out with Marise and the Terrible Garth when everyone else had safely faded away.

The best she could do was to go herself to the vestibule door when the reporters left in a body and breathe a few words to them. "I wouldn't take all this as being definitely decided, if I were you. There may be a quick change. Better say that nothing's settled." And again, when Belloc and Sheridan gloomily departed, "Don't give up. I'll 'phone you later. There's sure to be better news!"

Returning, Mary Sorel the dauntless was surprised and disgusted to find herself vaguely afraid of the man she had despised. She had the same fear of him that one has of an impersonal force like electricity, which cannot be counted on, and of which little is known except that it may strike without considering one's

feelings in the least. She tried to shake off the sensation, however, for the man had evidently hypnotised Marise in some secret, deadly way, perhaps by threats of violence. All was lost if she—Mary—did not keep her head.

She entered the salon, therefore, with a bustling air. "Now, Major Garth," she began, "I hope to hear the meaning of this—this *ridiculous* talk of my daughter throwing over her engagement and going West with you."

"She's thrown over one engagement in favour of another, hasn't she?" Garth inquired with his habitual quiet insolence. "If you asked the Reverend Mr. Jones, I think he'd say she had."

"I wish to ask no one anything about my daughter," Mrs. Sorel crushed the upstart. "I merely assert that it's time this nonsense ceased. It's gone disastrously far already."

"It's up to you and Marise to say how much further it shall go."

"'Marise'! Who gave you permission to call her Marise?"

Garth laughed. Even the girl uttered a faint hysterical giggle. It was rather funny to hear poor Mums ask that! But then Mums prided herself on having no vulgar sense of humour to interfere with justice.

"What would you like me to call her?" the man wanted to know. "'Miss Sorel' would be hardly proper now. And for a husband to call his wife 'Mrs. Garth' would be more suited, wouldn't it, to the lower circles I sprang from, than the high ones where she moves?"

Mary Sorel was reduced to heaving silence. As she bit her lip, Garth turned to Marise. "Would you pre-

fer me to make things clear to your mother, or would you rather I'd go, and leave it to you?"

Marise snatched at the chance he gave. "Go, please," she answered quickly. "I'll—tell Mums what you—said in the taxi. She and I will talk things over, and—and I'll see you again to-morrow or sometime."

"Or sometime," he echoed.

The girl expected him to remind her rudely of the bridal suite he had engaged in the hotel, but he did not. He took up his smart Guards cap, laid the handsome lavender-grey overcoat on his arm, and went to the door. "Au revoir," he said, pronouncing his French remarkably well for a man of the lower stratum. Then, without a word as to the next meeting, in spite of all his threats, he was gone.

What *did* it mean? Marise asked herself. Had he been bluffing? Or had he seen the monstrous folly of terrorising her? She would have given much to know. Perhaps he guessed that!

Ostentatiously Mums flew to lock the door. She locked it loudly, and running back took Marise into her arms. "My poor child!" she wailed. "What has he *done* to you? You are like a dove with a snake!"

Strange, that in a turmoil of anger and dread as she was, Marise was continually wanting to laugh! The thought of herself as a fluttering dove and the big, brutal Garth as a sinuous snake was comic! But there was, alas, nothing else comic in the situation, and she explained it as she saw it, while Mums punctuated each sentence with moans.

"It's awful!" sighed Mary at last. "But there's nothing really to be *feared,* so we must cheer up. Our protection is that this fellow's poor as a church rat (I *can't* call him a mouse!). When it comes to the point

he will have to toe the mark, and keep to his bargain——"

"Ah, that's it!" cried Marise. "He says through *my* action the bargain is off. He wouldn't explain what he meant: said I'd see for myself sooner or later. But I don't see yet. Do you?"

"I do not, indeed. I believe it's only more wicked bluff on his part. He talks of taking you West with him. What does he expect you to live on? Your own money? He hasn't got his million dollars yet, and he'll lose the lot unless he behaves himself," Mums laid down the law. "For goodness' sake, though, don't complain to Tony of the creature's threats! Tony would fight him—kill him, perhaps. What a sickening scandal! No, you've made an appalling mistake by marrying Garth before you needed to do so, and giving him a hold over you just as Tony is going so far away. But you can take care of yourself—or if you can't I can take care of you. As for this suite the man boasts about, I'll 'phone down now to the manager and question him. If it adjoins this, as it probably does—that would have been arranged if possible, no doubt—why, everything will be simple enough."

Marise did not answer. She was beginning to think that nothing was quite simple where Garth was concerned.

CHAPTER XIX

WHY THE BARGAIN WAS OFF

MARISE started late for the theatre, because she felt unequal to coping with her fellow actors' and actresses' well-meaning good wishes. She went alone with Céline, for Mums had developed a nervous sick headache, and the girl, like a dutiful daughter, had begged her to rest at home.

"You'll be more able to help me out with—any complications that may come afterwards," she said.

The star's wonderfully decorated dressing-room was entered through a still more wonderfully decorated reception or ante-room; and almost running in, Marise stopped short with a gasp of surprise. Not only was the place crammed with flowers—all white, bridal flowers (that in itself was not strange), but in the midst of them sat Garth, still in uniform. As his wife appeared he rose, grave and silent, as if awaiting a cue.

"Take these things into the dressing-room, Céline," ordered Marise, tossing her gold bag and furs to the maid. "I'll be there in a minute."

When Céline had obeyed, the girl looked the man up and down.

"Visitors don't intrude here, except by invitation," she informed him.

"Have you invited Lord Severance to intrude?" Garth asked.

"No-o, I haven't invited him."

"But he's coming, isn't he?"

"Possibly he may come. You know quite well, that's different."

"I do know. Just because it *is* different, I don't mean him to come unless I'm here too. But I've no wish to interfere with you otherwise. And if you tell me on your honour that you won't receive Severance alone (I don't count your maid as a chaperon), I'll go now. By the way, don't blame anyone for admitting me. The news is in all the late editions of the evening papers, I suppose you know, and naturally the bridegroom was expected to pay a call upon the bride."

Marise gazed at the formidable figure in khaki for a minute, and then without a word went into her dressing-room.

Mums, very likely, would have told the man a fib, getting rid of him by a promise not to see Severance alone. But the girl—though she, too, told fibs sometimes if driven into a corner—couldn't bring herself to utter one now. There was no time for a "scene," even if she were not in danger of coming out second best, so the dignified course was to retire. Tony wouldn't show up till the end of the first act at earliest; and if then she stood talking to someone or other outside her dressing-room as long as she dared, there might be time for a whisper with him while the watch-dog lay vainly in wait on the wrong side of the door!

Helped by Céline she dressed quickly, hearing no sound from the ante-room until the call-boy bounded in to shout her name. Instantly she ran through, half hoping that Garth had gone, though determined not to glance in his direction if he were still on the spot. He was; and somehow, without looking, Marise knew that he was quietly reading a book as if the place belonged to him.

Wild applause greeted the entrance of "Dolores," applause even more ardent than usual, and the play had to stop for the bride reluctantly to bow her acknowledgments. Marise had passed such an "upsetting" day that she came near having an attack of stage-fright, fearful of not taking her cue, or "drying up" in her words. But to her surprise and relief, she felt herself stronger in the part than she had ever been before. "I believe I really *am* a great actress!" she thought; and choked at the pity of it—the pity that—whatever happened now—she was bound to leave the stage. "Is Tony worth it all?" she wondered. But the Other Man's figure loomed so tall in the foreground, that she could not concentrate on Tony long enough to answer her own question.

Never had "Dolores" been impatient of too many curtain calls until now: but to-night they were irritating. They wasted such a lot of time, and any moment Tony might come!

There was little time to linger outside her dressing-room, but she did linger for a few minutes, talking with the reproachful Belloc. No card or message was brought to her, however, and she knew that Severance would not have been sent into her room without her permission. Garth sat stolid as a Buddha when she passed through, and she went by him as if he were a piece of furniture. She received a telepathic impression that he did not lift his eyes from his book!

The leading man had a scene with the villain of the piece at the beginning of the second act, and this gave the star a chance to rest, or chat with friends. It was the time when Severance generally dropped in, and she "felt in her bones" that his name would now be announced. Nor were her vertebræ deceived. Prompt to

the usual moment a knock, answered by Céline, brought news that "the Earl of Severance asked to see Miss Sorel."

"Tell him I'll come outside and talk with him!" she said on an impulse: but in the ante-room Garth stopped her.

"Don't you think," he said, "that you'd better have Severance shown in here? He won't be pleased if I come out with you as if from your dressing-room, *en famille,* so to speak. And I *shall* go out if you go, as in the circumstances I don't care for you to speak with him alone."

"Alone, do you call it, with stage hands and creatures of all sorts tearing about?" Marise rebelled.

"You can build up a wall with a whisper," said Garth.

As the girl hovered at the door, undecided, Céline returned. "Milord is waiting outside, Mademoiselle—I mean, Madame," she announced.

"Go back," ordered Marise, "and ask Lord Severance after all to come in."

The fat was in the fire now, indeed! Poor Mums' counsels concerning Tony were vain. He would see for himself how Garth repudiated the bargain. But it couldn't be helped. Better to have a "row" in her own quarters than outside!

Severance walked into the reception room, at his handsomest in evening dress. He came with his hands out to the lovely "Dolores," but let them fall at sight of Garth, and stopped just over the threshold, with a scowl bringing his black brows together.

Céline flitted by, and shut the door of the dressing-room behind her.

"What are *you* doing here?" Tony flung out the

words; yet he had an odd air of keeping his own truculence under control. Marise did not quite understand his manner, in which prudent hesitation fought with anger. But perhaps Garth understood. He knew why Severance's tooth was loose.

"I'm here," he said, "because I don't choose to have my wife talking with you alone."

Severance turned to the girl. "Marise, do you permit this man to be in your room, pretending to control your actions?"

"I have to," retorted Marise. "Since he won't leave us alone, we must just say what we have to say before him, whether he enjoys it or not. He isn't behaving at all according to—to contract. I would have said 'bargain,' only, whenever I mention that, he tells me there *isn't* a bargain. According to him, I've somehow destroyed it."

Severance looked stricken. "Wha—what does he mean by that?"

"I don't know. Ask him. We've got about fifteen minutes to have this out, before I'm called."

"That's what I'm anxious to do, 'have it out,'" said Garth. "But don't be alarmed, my wife; there'll be no violence started by me. If there is any it will come from the other side, whereupon I shall put the disturber of the peace out of your room. I'm stronger than he is physically, as he knows: and I hope to prove stronger in other ways."

"Don't talk like the villain of a Melville melodrama!" blurted Severance.

"I don't think *I'm* the villain of the piece," said Garth calmly. "Anyhow, we won't have more words about this than we need. My wife and you both want me to explain why I say she has made the so-called

'bargain,' nil. I believe, Lord Severance—to put the thing as it is—to face the facts—you proposed hiring me for the sum of a million dollars, to marry Miss Sorel, treat her as a stranger when we were alone, and as a kind husband in company, so there should be no ugly gossip about the marriage. Then, when you were free from the invalid wife you're financially compelled to take, I was supposed to step out of your way by letting this lady quietly divorce me."

It was useless to protest against so bald a way of putting the matter, which sounded disgusting to Severance, and could have been thus put, he considered, only by a very temporary gentleman. Therefore he did not protest. He replied with stifled fury that, willingly, even eagerly, Major Garth had consented to play a dummy's part in order to earn an easy million.

"Exactly," said Garth. "Well, I *have* married Miss Sorel. Where's the million?"

"You know as well as I do I haven't got the money yet, and can't get it till it's given me, as promised, by my uncle Constantine Ionides, after my wedding."

"So you explained the other day. You admit you can't carry out your half of the bargain. Yet I've carried out mine."

"That's on your own head!" barked Severance. "If you were so keen on money down, you shouldn't have married Miss Sorel till you could get it."

"What—you, an officer in the Guards, would advise a brother officer of the Brigade to refuse to marry a lady if she proposed to him?"

"Oh!" cried Marise; and Garth smiled at her with the yellow-grey eyes which were more than ever like the eyes of a lion. "You *did* propose, didn't you?"

"I—said I wanted to be married—to-day," the girl hedged. "If you call that——"

"I do. Any man would. You were in a hurry. You hoped, you said, that things might be fixed up for the wedding in an hour—or less. I fixed things up. We were married. Now I don't get my money. Consequently I consider myself free of any obligations concerned with the bargain. Though I'm willing to take legal opinion on the point, if you like?"

"A nice figure you'd cut if you did!" exploded Severance.

"I should say, 'the woman—or the earl—tempted me, and I did eat.' I ate by request. And I'm entitled to a core to my apple. There isn't any core. So I have the right either to chuck the peel away and let it fall in the mud, or else to hang on to it, and make up the best way I can for what lacks."

"I should like to kill you, Garth," said Severance.

"Well, when we're both safely out of my wife's dressing-room and this theatre, I'll give you a chance to try."

The lids over the dark, Greek eyes flickered slightly. Between the two men was a memory, a picture: a room at the Belmore Hotel, with a table and some chairs overturned: a few spots of blood on a lavender tie: not the tie of Garth.

"Being out of her theatre wouldn't save Miss Sorel from scandal if we made fools of ourselves," Tony said.

"That's the sensible view," agreed Garth. "I'm at your service for war or peace. But the fact remains that I am Marise Sorel's husband, and as I'm not paid for taking on the job, you, Severance, have no concern with my conduct to her. The rest is between my wife and myself. If she wishes me to leave her I will do so

now, at this moment—on my own terms. If she wishes me to stay by her side for appearance' sake, I'll stay—also on my own terms."

"What are your terms?" Tony's dry lips formed the words almost without sound.

"They'll be settled to-night between my wife and me. You have nothing whatever to do with them."

"If—if you fail in respect for her, you never get your million dollars when the time comes!" Severance almost sobbed.

"When the time comes—the time can decide," said Garth.

"Miss Sorel!" bawled the call-boy at the door.

CHAPTER XX

THE BRIDAL SUITE

IT was, as Severance told himself, the damnedest scrape! And he could see no present way out of it. Turn as he would, he was merely running round and round in a "vicious circle."

He couldn't murder Garth, or otherwise eliminate him, without setting fire to his dearest hopes, and seeing his fortune go up in a blaze. Garth mustn't be allowed to walk away from Marise, leaving her in the position of a deserted bride, after a sensational wedding. Nor could Severance bear to think of the man's remaining near her, now that he proclaimed the bargain "off," and himself free and independent.

If only the fellow might be knocked over by a taxi and killed, there would be the perfect solution! But even that ought not to happen just yet. It wouldn't do for Marise to be known as a widow before he, Severance, could bring Œnone to America as a bride. The celebrated Miss Sorel might as well never have been married at all, so far as old Constantine Ionides was concerned.

There were two faintly glimmering spots in the general blackness of things. *Bright* spots they hardly deserved to be called! Such as they were, one was the fact that Garth—despite his bluff—was unlikely to sacrifice all hope of the million by making forbidden love to Marise. The other gleam was: even if Garth did play the fool as well as the cad, Marise had asserted

up to the last moment that she could take care of herself.

Severance had reason to believe that she could. If she'd not had a cool little head, and a high opinion of her own value, the favourite actress would not have attained the position she held. "Lots of chaps had been after her," including Tony Severance: men of title, men with money, men of genius, men of charm, and she had held her own with them all, forcing their respect. Well, there wasn't much chance for a bullying brute of Garth's stamp, to get the best of a girl like that!

So Severance consoled himself, after his decision at the theatre that nothing would be gained by attempting to "rescue" Marise from Garth. After leaving her—bidding her good-bye for long and anxious weeks—he could not resist 'phoning Mrs. Sorel at the Plaza, though Marise had told him that Mums was bowled over by a sick headache. He rang the poor lady up—literally up!—and discussed the situation with her, not daring to call for fear of detectives set upon him by cable from London. The poor lady, dragged out of bed, was sympathetic and soothing. Everything was "perfectly all right," she assured him. She would watch over Marise for his sake as well as her own. Marise would watch over herself, too! And she—Mary Sorel—would write or cable Tony to his club twice or three times a week.

"I'd go down to the docks and see you off to-morrow morning, dear boy, no matter at what ghastly hour you sail," Mums said, "only I don't think it would be wise, do you?"

No, Tony didn't. But she might send him a note by messenger to the ship, with all the latest news.

She would do that without fail, Mary promised; and

so at last hung up the receiver with a sigh which would have frightened Severance had it reached him on the wire. Mums was not as calm about the future as she had tried to make her "dear boy" think!

Though she had been lying down, she crawled off the bed again, and put on a smart tea-gown before it was time for her daughter to come home. She had little doubt that the Beast would be with Marise; and her own attempt at "frightfulness" having failed against his armour of brutality, she intended to try diplomacy in the next encounter.

Already she had learned that the suite engaged by Major Garth for himself and his bride did not adjoin the one occupied by herself and Marise since their arrival in New York. It appeared that the manager had offered a suite of two rooms and a bath next to the Sorel suite, but Major Garth had refused this as being too small. Nothing "large enough for his requirements" had been available near Mrs. Sorel; but fortunately it was on the same floor.

This, the manager seemed to think, ought to content the lady; and indeed, she was obliged to pretend satisfaction. She would like to see the suite, she had said; but to her dismay the privilege was refused with regret. Major Garth, the manager explained, had given a "rush order" for some special decorations to surprise Mrs. Garth; and he had requested that no one—*no one at all* except the decorators—should be allowed to enter until the bridal pair arrived.

"But," Mrs. Sorel had argued, "he couldn't have meant *me*. Besides, if no one goes in, my daughter won't have any of her toilet things ready. There will be a scramble and confusion when she comes home tired from the theatre."

The manager, however, was reluctantly firm. He "mustn't tell tales out of school," but he thought he *might* just relieve Mrs. Sorel's fears by saying that there would be no trouble at all of that sort. The Major's "surprise" would—he hoped—be as pleasing to her as to the bride. And whatever had to be done in addition could be accomplished in a few minutes by Mrs. Garth's maid.

Naturally, Mrs. Sorel was on tenterhooks after this information, which she had obtained by telephone, lying on her bed, soon after Marise and Céline left for the theatre. It determined her to be prepared for battle, no matter how ill she might feel: for it was impossible that Marise should ever cross the threshold of that mysteriously decorated suite. Therefore the neat coiffure of the aching head, and the dignified tea-gown of satin and jet.

On the few occasions when Mums had been unable to go with Marise to the theatre, the girl had either returned early, or telephoned that she would be late in reaching home. Mrs. Sorel expected her to start for the hotel to-night the instant she was dressed and had her make-up off. She would doubtless be thankful to escape questions, and get back to her mother—which really meant, ridding herself of Garth.

But time crept on. Marise was half an hour late: then three-quarters. What could have happened? Had that monster kidnapped the poor child?

At the thought, Mums experienced the sensation of cold water slowly trickling through her spine. "What shall I do?" she wondered. And her mind turned to the thought—the terrible thought—of applying to the police. If she took this extreme step, what would

be the result? Could a man be arrested for abducting his own wife?

As she writhed and sighed helplessly on a sofa in sight of the mantel clock, Céline's familiar tap sounded at the door, and the Frenchwoman came in. Mrs. Sorel's anguished eyes saw that she looked pale and excited. Her own heart seemed to rise and shrug itself in her breast, then collapse sickeningly upon other organs.

"For Heaven's sake, where is Mademoiselle?" she panted.

"Ah, Madame," sighed Céline, "we must speak of Mademoiselle no more."

"Why—why?" broke in the distracted mother.

"But, because she is now indeed 'Madame'! She is with—her *husband.*"

"Where?" gasped Mrs. Sorel.

"In their suite. A suite of great magnificence."

The unhappy Mums staggered to her feet, among falling cushions.

"Good gracious!" she groaned. "He has dragged her there——"

"No, no, Madame, it is not so bad as that," Céline soothed her. "*Madame la Jeune Mariée* appeared to go with Monsieur of her own will. She showed no fear. She was only a little quiet—a little strange. It must have been arranged at the theatre, what was to happen, for I was with them in a car—but yes, a car, no taxi!—which Monsieur had ordered to wait at the stage door. I sat, not with the chauffeur, but inside on one of the little fold-up seats. The two did not speak at all, Madame, not once, till we had arrived here, at the hotel. Then Mademoiselle—I mean Madame Garth—said, 'I should like Céline to come with me.' 'Very

well, let her come,' Monsieur answered. That was all. I went with them. Monsieur asked for his key. It was given him. We were taken up in the *ascenseur* to this floor. But instead of turning to the right, we turned left. Monsieur unlocked the door, switched on lights, and stood aside for Madame his wife to pass. Even me, he let go in before him. Then he followed and shut the door."

"What then?" breathed Mrs. Sorel.

"Mon Dieu, Madame, the suite was of a magnificence! It must be the best in the house. The suite in which they put royalties who come visiting from Europe. And not only that, the whole place has been made a garden of flowers—wonderful flowers. This Monsieur le Majeur must be, after all, though he does not look it, a millionaire!"

"He is far from being a millionaire," sneered Mums. "He hasn't a sou, so far as I've heard. He'll probably charge all this wild extravagance to us. He's capable of it—capable of *anything!* But go on."

"Well, Madame, the suite has an entrance hall of its own, not a tiny vestibule like this one. The hall has many pots of gorgeous azaleas, of colours like a sunrise in paradise. *Madame la Jeune Mariée* walked into the salon. The husband went also. But, me, I stood outside waiting. I could see into the room, however. I chose my place for that purpose, to see! A lovely salon of pearl grey and soft rose. And the flowers there were all roses, different shades of pink. There were many, some growing in pots, very tall; some cut ones in crystal vases and jars: and on a table, a marvellous bowl, illuminated, with flowers floating on the surface of bright water. Also, Madame, there were presents,

jewels in cases. If these, as Madame says, are to be charged to her, Mon Dieu, it will be a disaster!"

"What were the presents?" The question asked itself, out of the turmoil that was Mums' mind. But behind the turmoil a voice seemed crying, "Why do you stop here talking of trifles, instead of rushing to save your wretched child?"

But Céline was replying. After all, what use to go, since the door of the suite would be closed, and one could not shriek and beat upon the panels for the whole world to hear!

"There was a large case with a double row of pearls. It must be, I think, not a string, but a rope. There was also a lovely thing for the hair, a wreath of laurel leaves made of green stones, doubtless emeralds. And there was a pendant, a star of diamonds with a great cabochon sapphire—Mademoiselle's beloved jewel!—in the centre. There may have been other things, but those were all I remarked. I saw them from the doorway. Yet, if Madame will believe me, *la Jeune Mariée* did not regard them. Neither did Monsieur draw her attention to his gifts—no, not by gesture nor word."

"She must have said *something!*" cried Mary.

"She murmured that the flowers were charming. You would have thought she had not seen the jewels, though she must have seen them, Madame, if I saw from my distance. Monsieur asked if she would like to view the rest of the suite. She answered, 'Oh yes, please!' Then, out into the entrance hall they came. Monsieur threw open the door of a room next the salon, and as he did so put on the lights. But—with that, he stepped back. My young lady called me, 'Céline!' I ran to her, and he stopped there in the hall. Ah, another surprise! Not the beauty of this great bed-

room. That one would expect in such a suite—a *white* room, Madame, and white flowers, roses not too heavily perfumed! But the surprise was on the toilet-table. Brushes, bottles, everything, oh, so delicious a set!—in gold. A queen could have no better. On the bed, Madame, lay a *robe de chambre* more beautiful than any that Mademoiselle has ever possessed—which Madame knows, is to say much!—and on the floor—like blossoms fallen on the white fur rug—lay a little pair of *mules,* made of gold embroidery on cloth of silver, and having buckles of old paste fit for the slippers of Cinderella! When she had looked round for a few moments, quite silent, Madame, the bride turned to me. 'Now you have seen what is here, Céline,' she said, 'you can go to my room and bring me just the things you think I shall need.' "

"Did she give you the key of the suite?" Mary asked sharply.

"But no, Madame, she did not give me a key. I shall have to knock."

"Very well, run and put a few things together," Mary directed. "It doesn't much matter what, as Mademois—my daughter—will not, I think, stay long in the suite. When you are ready, come back here to me. I will go down with you. When the door is opened, I shall walk in before it can be shut. But mind, you will speak or hint to *no* one of what I do, or what I say to you—or what you may see or overhear."

"Madame may depend upon me," Céline assured her. "Ah, that poor Milord Severance! *Mais, c'est le Destin!*"

CHAPTER XXI

KEEPING UP APPEARANCES!

YOU said at the theatre, if I trusted you enough to come here with you," Marise began as Céline left, "you would tell me a plan you thought I'd approve. Well, I did trust you! I *had* to, just as I had to this afternoon when you said the same thing in the taxi. Here I am. But so far, I don't see anything that reassures me much. All the flowers and jewel-cases and gold things are beautiful bribes. The only trouble about them is, that *I* don't take bribes—even if you can afford to offer them!"

"I understand that emphasis," said Garth. "*You* don't take bribes. I do. And you think, in making this collection I've 'gambled in futures.' "

Marise was silent.

"That's what you do think, isn't it?" he insisted.

"Something of the sort may have flitted through my head."

"Well, if I'm not above bribery and corruption—and the rest of it—that's on my own conscience. In other words, it's my own business. Your business is—to keep up appearances, and at the same time keep up the proprieties."

"That's one way of expressing it!"

"Yes, again my beastly vulgar way! But I won't stop to apologise because I know you're in a hurry to settle this question between us once for all. Because,

when it is settled, it *will* be once for all, so far as I'm concerned."

"I see. Go on, please!"

He looked at her, a long look. "You and I are here alone together," he said. "Husband and wife! For we *are* married, you know. Does that make you shiver —or shudder?"

"I don't think we *feel* very married—either of us," Marise answered in a small, ingratiating voice, like a child's.

"You don't know how I feel," said Garth. "But I'm not anxious to punish you by torture for anything you've done, no matter what you may deserve, so I won't keep you in suspense. You admit that if—we *did* 'feel married,' and if—we cared about each other as ordinary new-married couples do, this 'bridal suite'—as they call it—would be the proper dodge?"

"Oh yes," agreed Marise, wondering what he was working up to. Her heart was beating too fast for her wits to be at their nimblest, but she hadn't missed those words of his which had either slipped out, or been spoken with subtle purpose: "If we cared about each other." Only a few days ago—apparently with his soul in his eyes—he had said that he'd give that soul to get her for his own. Well, the incredible had happened, and she *was* his own—in a way. Was he so disgusted with her behaviour and motives that he'd suddenly ceased to care? Or was he silly enough to think it would hurt her if he pretended not to care? Certainly she had done nothing worse than *he* had! Whatever he might think, she had married him largely from pique, to spite Tony Severance; though, of course, that wasn't to say she wouldn't carry out Tony's scheme when the time came. Whereas he, John Garth, had

accepted a bribe. She was worth a million dollars to Tony: and the million dollars were worth a basely caddish act to Garth.

"You want your friends and the public in general to believe we are the ordinary loving couple, don't you?" he was asking.

"Of course. I may have earned them, but I don't *want* horrid things said. Especially——"

"Especially on Severance's account, and because of the arrangements he proposes to make for your future, I suppose you were going to say. Why stop?"

"Because you suppose wrong. I wasn't going to say anything of the kind. 'Especially on account of poor Mums,' were the words on the tip of my tongue. I stopped—well, I thought it sounded sentimental. Besides, you'd probably not believe me."

"I think I would believe you," said Garth. "I don't know you very well yet, but things that have happened have shown me a bit of what you're like, inside yourself. You've got plenty of faults. I should say you're as selfish as they make 'em. You don't really take much interest in anything that doesn't affect you and your affairs. You've been badly spoiled, but not quite ruined: and I think you don't enjoy telling lies."

"Thank you for your charming compliments!" flashed Marise, the blood in her cheeks. Spoiled indeed! Everyone said she was wonderfully *un*spoiled—simple and sweet-natured as a child. Those were the people who *knew* her!

"To get back to a more important subject," went on Garth; "I was going to tell you that, honestly, one half the reason I took this suite and made you come to it with me, was for your sake: to have you do the right, conventional, bridal thing everyone expects of you, and

would be blue with curiosity if you didn't do. The other half was to find out whether you were capable of rising to an occasion."

"Rising—how?" questioned Marise.

"Rising high enough to trust a man to do—after his lights—the decent thing. Not to carry out a bargain, because there is none. I'd be breaking no promise if I grabbed you in my arms this moment. I mean, the decent thing that any man owes any woman who puts herself in his power. Now I've said enough. You'll understand me better in a minute by going over this suite, than by listening to an hour's explanation in words. I'll wait for you here." (They were in the salon.) "Walk round, and draw your own conclusions. Then come back and tell me what the conclusions are."

Marise was quite sharp enough to guess what he meant, but—stepping out into the azalea-filled entrance hall, she passed the open door of the beautiful white bedroom. Beyond it was another door. She opened this, and touching an electric switch, flooded a room with light.

Here, too, was a bedroom, smaller, less elaborate, more suited to the occupation of a man than the other. Instead of the carved white wood and gilded cane of the room next door, the furniture was mahogany, of the Queen Anne period; and the carpet, instead of pale Aubusson, was the colour of wallflowers. There were some plain ebony brushes and toilet things on the dressing-table, and underneath the table were boot-trees. Evidently Garth had had his belongings brought over from the Belmore!

A glance sufficed Marise. She went slowly back to the salon where Garth stood staring down on the display of jewellery on the table.

"Well?" He looked up with something defiant and oddly sullen about his face. "You understand my 'plan'?"

"Yes," said Marise. "I understand. But——"

"But what? Didn't you try the door between that other room and your own, and satisfy yourself that it's locked with the key on your side?"

"I didn't try it," the girl answered, "because—I was somehow sure it would be like that."

"Why were you sure?"

"I don't know, exactly. I was."

"Your sureness was the result of trust in me, as a decent man in spite of the fact that you think I'm not a gentleman?"

"Ye-es, I suppose it was trust."

"Then why that 'but' just now?"

"Oh—it's rather hard to put into words what was to come after the 'but'—without hurting your feelings. And I don't want to do that. It only makes things a lot worse."

"I don't mind having my feelings hurt. I'm hardened. Besides, if you hurt mine I'm free to hurt yours if I like in return. Shoot!"

"Well—I believe you mean what you've said to me—and shown me. I do trust you—now. But for how long dare I? Can you trust yourself?"

He smiled down at her; and it *looked* like a scornful smile, but of course it couldn't be that. "Your question is easy to answer," he said. "I trust myself, and shall continue to trust myself, because there's no temptation to resist. I shall keep to my own half of this suite, with the less difficulty because I haven't the slightest wish to intrude on yours. Now you know where you stand. But there's a knock! I suppose that's your maid."

CHAPTER XXII

A SHOCK AND A SNUB OR TWO

IT was the maid. It was also Mrs. Sorel, who pushed past Céline and darted into the hall.

"My darling!" she shrilled at sight of Marise. "You look as if you'd had a most horrible shock!"

It was just this that the girl had had: the shock of her life. She, undesired—*not* a temptation! Alone with a man—a mere brute—who had the strength and the legal right to take her against her will, but remained cold; did not want her.

She might have believed this statement to be a sequel to that hint about "hurting her feelings if he liked," but Garth's face was cold. It might have been carved from rock. It looked like rock—that red-brown kind. There was no fierce, controlled passion in the tawny eyes, such as men on the stage would carefully have betrayed in these situations, or such as men had far from carefully betrayed to her in real life, disgusting or frightening her at the time: though afterwards the scene had pleased, or—well *flattered* her to dwell on in safe retrospect. It was rather glorious, though sometimes painful, she'd often said to herself, the power she had to make men *feel.* Yet this Snow-man didn't feel at all. He simply *didn't!* You could see that by his icicle of a face.

"You mustn't worry, dear Mums," soothed Marise. "I'm doing the best thing for everyone: keeping up

appearances! And as Major Garth dislikes me—I am not his style, it seems—I'm perfectly safe. Safe as if I were in our rooms, with you."

Garth gazed gravely at Mrs. Sorel. "She's safer than with you, Madame. I assure you she's as safe as —as if she were in cold storage."

Mary gasped.

Marise laughed.

But she felt as though she'd read in a yellow newspaper that Miss Sorel was the plainest girl and the worst actress in the world.

. . . . . .

Mums was persuaded to go, at last, after having upbraided her daughter, with tears, for forcing them all —including Lord Severance—into such a deplorable, such a perilous situation.

As for the peril, after Garth's words, and still more his *look,* all thrill of danger and the chance of a fight, with a triumphant if exhausting close, had died. Marise felt dull and "anti-climaxy," and homesick for her friends, the dear public who loved and appreciated her. Céline remained to undress her mistress, having (despite Mrs. Sorel's advice) brought various articles from Marise's own room. When at last the bride was ready for bed in a dream of a "nighty" fetched by her maid, Céline thought of the jewels on a table in the salon.

By this time the room was empty, Garth having retired like a bear to his den; and the Frenchwoman took it on herself to transfer the valuables to the bedroom adjoining. "They will be safer here," she said. "Unless Mademoiselle—Madame—would like me to carry the cases to the other suite and put them in the care of Madame his mother."

"No, leave everything here," directed Marise.

She had made up her mind not to keep the gifts. They were beautiful, and she wouldn't have been a woman if she'd not wanted them. But she wanted still more the stern splendour of handing the spoil back to Garth, advising him to return the jewels whence they came, since *only millionaires* should buy such expensive objects. But she would not of course take a servant, even Céline—who knew everything and a little more than everything—into her confidence.

She gave the Frenchwoman a key (which had been handed her by Garth) to use in the morning, when the time came for early tea, a bath, and being dressed. Then, when the maid had departed with a click of the outer door, an idea sprang into the mind of Marise. At first she thought it would not do. Then she thought it would. And the more she thought in both directions, the more she was enmeshed by the idea itself.

Only half an hour had elapsed since Garth went to his room. The man wouldn't be human, after what they'd passed through, if he had gone to bed. Marise was sure he had done no such thing: and she fancied that she caught a faint whiff of tobacco stealing through the keyhole of that stout locked door between their rooms.

At last she could no longer resist the call of the blood —or whatever it was. She switched on the light again, jumped up, and looked for a dressing-gown. Bother! Céline hadn't brought one—had taken it for granted she would use that wonderful thing which Garth's taste —or the taste of some hidden guide of his—had provided.

Well, what did it matter, anyhow? She would slip it on—and the sparkling gold and silver *mules,* too.

She glanced in the long Psyche mirror. She *did* look divine! Even a rock-carved statue couldn't deny that! Gathering up the jewels, she unlocked the door which led into the hall, and tapped at the door of Garth's room, adjoining her own.

"If you're not in bed," she called, "come out a minute, will you? I've something important to say."

All that was minx in Marise was revelling in the thought that presently Garth would suffer a disappointment. He would imagine that she wished to plead for grace from him. Then, before he could snub her, she'd give *him* the snub of his life—just as he had given her, Marise Sorel, the shock of hers!

Garth did not answer at once. The girl was hesitating whether to call him again, when his voice made her start. It sounded *sleepy!* "I *am* in bed," he said. "What do you want? Is it too important to wait till morning?"

"It's merely that I wished to put the jewels which were left in the salon into your charge," Marise replied with freezing dignity. "I do not think they are safe there."

"Wouldn't they be safe enough with you?" came grumpily—yes, grumpily!—through the closed door.

"No doubt. But I don't wish to have the responsibility, as I don't care to accept them. . . ."

"Oh, I see! Well, if that's your decision, it doesn't matter whether they're safe or not. Leave the things in the corridor if your room's too sacred for them. If that's all you want, I shall not get out of bed."

What a man!

"One would think you were a multi-millionaire!" Marise couldn't resist that one last, sarcastic dig.

"So I may be for all you know. Do what you like with the silly old jewels."

Marise threw the cases on the floor as loudly as she could. She knew that the outer door was locked, and that Céline would be the first person in, when morning came, so the act wasn't as reckless as it seemed. But it was a relief to her nerves at the moment.

The filmy dressing-gown, the sparkling *mules,* the hair down, the general heartbreaking divineness, were *wasted.*

CHAPTER XXIII

THE DREAM

MARISE slept little, in what was left of that strange wedding night.

She tried to think of Tony Severance, who must be suffering tortures through his love and fears for her. But somehow he had lost importance. He had become a figure in the background. Her thoughts would turn their "spot light" upon the man in the adjoining room.

Was he asleep? Was he awake? Was he thinking about her, and if so, what? Why had he married her? If it was for love, as she had fancied at first, could he have treated her as he had? That was hard to believe! Yet it was harder to believe his motives wholly mercenary.

"Perhaps that's because I'm vain," the girl told herself. And she remembered, her cheeks hot, how Garth had accused her of vanity and selfishness. He'd said that she took no interest in anything which didn't concern Marise Sorel. She had been angry then, and thought him unjust and hard. But in her heart she knew that he had touched the truth. She *was* vain and selfish. And she was hard, too, just as hard to him as he to her.

"*He* has made me so!" she excused herself. "I was never hard to anyone else before, in all my life."

But she could not rest on this special pleading. What right had she to be hard to this man? She had *asked*

him to marry her. His crime was that he had granted her wish and consented to play this dummy hand; and now the deed was done he was not grovelling to her or to Tony Severance. How much more *British* he seemed, by the by, than dark, Greek Tony, of subtle ways!

At luncheon, talking with Pobbles, he had spoken of Yorkshire as *his* county. Marise wondered what he had meant. But, of course, she would not ask. John Garth's past was no affair of hers. Still, she couldn't stop puzzling about him. She puzzled nearly all night. He was turning out such a different man from the man she had vaguely imagined! In fact, he was different from any man she had ever met, off the stage or on.

Staring into darkness as the hours passed, Marise felt that she could not wait for Céline. She'd get up at dawn, dress, and flit to her own room in Mums' suite. But no! She couldn't do that. She hadn't a key to that suite. She would have to pound on the door, and other people beside Mums and Céline would hear. There would be gossip—which she'd sacrificed much already to avoid.

Dreading the long night of wakefulness, the girl suddenly dropped fast asleep, and began at once to dream of Garth. Zélie Marks was in the dream, too, and—dreams are so ridiculous!—Marise was jealous. What had happened between the two she didn't know; but she would have known in another instant, for Zélie was going to confess, if a rap had not sounded at the door and made her sit up in a fright. Marise was just about to cry, "You can't come in!" when she realised that it was the peculiar double knock of Céline.

The Frenchwoman was prompt, though the night had seemed so long. Her mistress sipped hot, fragrant Orange Pekoe from an eggshell cup, and in a whisper

bade Céline move quietly, not to rouse Monsieur Garth in the next room.

"Oh, Mademoiselle—Madame!" said the maid. "Monsieur has gone out, early as it is. His door is wide open."

Marise must have slept more soundly than she knew. She hadn't heard a sound.

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask Céline about the jewel-cases—if they were lying in the corridor. But she couldn't put such a question! The maid would be too curious—she would fancy there had been some vulgar quarrel instead of—instead of—well, Marise hardly knew how to qualify her own conduct.

"I'm afraid I *was* vulgar," she thought, like a child repenting last night's misdeeds. "It was horrid of me to throw those lovely things on the floor. Poor fellow, he must have spent a fortune—*somebody's* fortune (whose, I wonder?)—on those pearls, and diamonds and emeralds, and all the rest. Yet I never said one word of gratitude. I was never such a brute before! . . . I'm sure it *must* be his fault. Still—I don't like myself one bit better than I like him."

As Garth had gone out, there was no great need for haste. Céline had brought all that was needed, and Marise might dress—as well as repent—at leisure. But she was wild with impatience to know whether the jewels were lying where she had thrown them. While Céline was letting the bath-water run, the girl peeped out into the flower-scented corridor. The jewel-cases had gone!

This discovery gave her a slight shock. She had more than half expected to see them on the floor, and had wondered what she would do if they were there—whether she would pick them up and decide to accept

the gifts after all, with a stiff, yet decent little speech of gratitude. "I'm sure you meant to do what I would like, and I don't wish to hurt your feelings," or something of that sort.

Now, what should she do? The probability was that Garth himself had retrieved his rejected treasures. But there was just a chance—such horrors happened in hotels!—that a thief had pussy-footed into the suite to search for wedding presents, and had found them easily in an unexpected place. That would be *too* dreadful! Because, if she—Marise—held her tongue, Garth would always believe that *she* had annexed the things, and had chosen to be sulkily silent.

"I shall have to bring up the subject somehow, the next time we meet—whenever that may be!" she thought ruefully.

When Mrs. Garth arrived in the maternal suite, it was about the hour when Miss Sorel had been in the habit of slipping, half-dressed, from bedroom to salon. It was the time, also, when Miss Zélie Marks was accustomed to present herself, and begin her morning tasks: sharpening pencils, sorting letters, etc. But today the salon was unoccupied. The letters lay in a fat, indiscriminate heap, just as Céline had received them from one of the floor-waiters.

Mrs. Sorel was still in bed, and still suffering from last night's headache, which had increased, rather than diminished. She burst into tears at sight of Marise, but was slowly pacified on hearing the story of the night.

"He was afraid to——" she began; but the girl broke in with the queerest sensation of anger. "He *wasn't* afraid—of *anything!* Whatever else he may have been, he wasn't afraid. I don't believe the creature knows how to be afraid."

Mrs. Sorel did not insist. She didn't wish to waste time discussing Garth. She wanted to talk of Tony. There was a letter from him. It had come by hand, early—sent as he was starting. Of course he hadn't dared write to Marise direct, but there was an enclosure for her.

"You had better read it now," advised Mums. "At any moment that man may turn up, asking for you, and trying to make some scene."

Marise took the crested envelope that had come inside her mother's note from Tony; but somehow or other she felt an odd repulsion against it. She didn't care to read what Tony had to say to Mrs. John Garth at parting; and she had an excuse to procrastinate because, just then, the telephone sounded in the salon adjoining.

"Will you go, dearest? Or shall I ring for Céline?" Mums asked.

Marise answered by walking into the salon and picking up the receiver. Her heart was beating a little with the expectation of Garth's voice from—somewhere. Their own suite, perhaps? But a woman was speaking.

"Is it you, Mrs. Sorel?" was the question that came. And the heart-beats were not calmed, for Marise recognised the contralto tones of Miss Marks, the villainess of her dream.

"No, it's I, *Miss* Sorel," she answered. "What's the matter? Aren't you coming as usual?"

"I am sorry, no, I can't come," replied the voice across the wire. "I thought that now—you're married, *Mrs. Garth,* and going away before long, I should no longer be required. But in any case I——"

"If we hadn't required your services we should have told you, and given you two weeks' salary in lieu of notice," snapped Marise professionally.

"I hardly supposed you had time to think about me, everything was so confused yesterday," Zélie excused herself. "Anyhow, Mrs. Garth, I must give notice myself, for I've had news which will take me out of New York at once. I've got to start by the next train. It doesn't matter about money. I was paid up only a few days ago. We were just starting fresh——"

"I'm sure my mother will wish to pay, and insist upon doing so," said Marise. "When does your train go?"

"I'm not certain to the minute," hedged Miss Marks. "But I have to pack. I——"

"That won't prevent your receiving an envelope with what we owe you in it," persisted Marise. "I suppose you're 'phoning from your flat?"

"Yes—no. Yes. But I'll be gone before a messenger could get here. *Please* don't trouble."

"Very well, give me your address at the town where you're going," Marise said. "We can post you on a cheque."

"I can't do that, I'm afraid," objected Miss Marks. "I shall be moving about from place to place for awhile. It's really no *use,* Mrs. Garth, thank you—though of course it's kind of you to care. Please say good-bye to Mrs. Sorel for me. You've both been very good."

"I wish you'd sent us word last night," said Marise, whose eyes were bright, and whose hand, holding the receiver, had begun to throb as if she had a heart in her wrist.

"I didn't know last night. The news I spoke of came this morning."

"It must have come early!"

"It did. Good-bye, Mrs. Garth."

"Wait just a second. Are you going—West?"

"Ye-es. For awhile."

"You can't tell me where?"

"Oh, several places. Not far from my old home."

"Did you ever mention where that was?"

But no answer came. Either they had been cut off, or Zélie Marks had impudently left the telephone.

The dream came back to Marise—the dream where Garth and the stenographer had been whispering together in a room where Marise could not see them.

"I believe he's with her now," the girl thought. "I believe when he went out this morning he went straight to *her*. He's told her to do something, and she intends to do it."

To that question, "Are you going West?" Zélie had hesitatingly responded, "Ye-es." What did it mean?

CHAPTER XXIV

ACCORDING TO MUMS

THAT same afternoon, Mary Sorel began a letter to Severance, a letter embroidered with points of admiration, dashes, underlinings, and parentheses.

"Dear Tony," she wrote, for she felt the warm affection of an Egeria, mingled with that of a mother-in-law elect, for him: and it pleased all that was snobbish in her soul to have this intimate feeling for an earl.

"Dear Tony, I shall be cabling you about the time you land, according to promise. But I promised as well to write a sort of *diary* letter, giving you all the developments day by day, and posting the document at the end of the week. Well, this is the first instalment, written —as you'll see by the date—on the day of your sailing.

"How I wish I had better news to give you! But don't be alarmed. Things are *not* going as we hoped, yet they might be worse. And now you are prepared by that preface, I'll try to tell you exactly the state of affairs!

"At least, I shall be able to explain a mystery that puzzled and worried us both yesterday, after the—I suppose in lieu of a better word I'm bound to call it 'marriage'! Neither you nor I could understand precisely how *That Man* had got my poor child so under his thumb, when by rights *he* should have been under *her foot!*

"What he does is this: he simply threatens at every

turn to go away and tell everyone, *including newspaper men,* the whole story from beginning to end. You might think with an ordinary person that this was all *bluff*. Because, if the story hurt you and Marise, and even *me,* it would hurt him as much. But whatever he may be (and he might be almost *anything!*) he is *not* an ordinary person. He appears perfectly reckless of his own reputation. Apparently he cares not enough to lift his finger, or let it fall, for the opinion of others, no matter *who*. If he said he would do some dreadful thing it wouldn't be safe to hope he was merely making an idle threat. He would *do* it, I'm sure he would!

"That's the secret of his power over our poor little Marise, and I must admit, to a certain extent over *me*.

"I have been having a long talk with him about the future—the *immediate* future, I mean, of course, for the more distant future I hope and believe will be controlled by *you!*

"When I reproached the man for browbeating my daughter, he actually retorted that we had no right to try and pin him to a certain line of conduct, and not *pay* him for it! *Shameless!* But that sample will show you what we are going *through*. I shall indeed rejoice for every reason when you are restored to us. You have told me that your cousin Œnone has what amounts to a million of American dollars, all her own, and that her father intends giving you another million on your marriage to her; so you will be in a position to complete your bargain with this Fiend. In order to obtain the money, he will *have* to keep his part of the agreement.

"Yes, 'Fiend' is the word. Indeed, I used it aloud this afternoon in addressing him, so utterly did he enrage me. He will not allow Marise to go with me to Los Angeles and accept the loan of Bell Towers, which

you so kindly placed at our disposal till your return with your poor little invalid, Œnone. He has a house of his own, out West, it seems—Arizona or somewhere *wild*-sounding. I believe it's near the Grand Canyon—wherever *that* is! And heaven alone knows what it's like—the *house,* I mean, not the Canyon, which I am told is an immense abyss miles deep, full of *blood*-red rocks or something terrific.

"Garth insists that the unhappy child shall accompany him to this desolate spot, which is more or less on the way to California. The alternative he puts before her is of course the eternal (I nearly said, 'infernal'!) one, of deserting his bride with a blast of trumpets. Neither you, nor Marise, nor I, can afford to let *this* happen! Almost anything would be preferable at a crisis so delicate for you with your uncle. Especially as Marise *vows* that, alone with her, the monster is not so formidable. In fact, she says she can account for his conduct at these times only by supposing that he does not like her, or is *in love with someone else.*

"I wonder, by the way, do you know at all if he has *any* money? My impression, when he so easily accepted your somewhat original offer, was that he had none. But he made Marise several handsome presents of jewellery, which must have cost a great deal, *if* he paid cash! Perhaps he used his V.C. to get them on *tick*—if such a thing is possible! Marise refused, quite definitely, she tells me, to take these gifts from him. To-day, she chanced to ask Garth how he had disposed of them after her refusal. Though she put the question *most* tactfully, even remarking that she was *sorry* for some little abruptness when returning the jewel-cases (I don't know details!), the man *denied* her right to ask what he had done. Marise persisted, however, in that

sweet little *determined* way she has, and Garth *at length* flung out in reply that he had *given the things to another person.* Imagine it! Marise's *wedding* presents!

"Nothing more was to be got out of him, however. Instinct whispers to me that the child suspects a certain young woman of having received the jewels. (Why, such a thing is almost like being a *receiver of stolen goods,* since surely they're the property of Marise. Not that she *wants* or would look at them again!) She did not *tell* me this. It is my own heart—the heart of a *mother*—which speaks. All she said was, that Garth wouldn't mention the name of the receiver, and resented her 'catechising' him. He put the matter like this: If *she'd* given *him* wedding presents, and he practically trampled them under foot, with scorn, wouldn't she consider herself free to do what she liked with the objects? Wouldn't she wish to get rid of them and never see them again? Wouldn't her first thought be to give them away? And how would she feel if *he* wanted to know what she'd done with the things?

"To the three first questions, Marise found herself obliged to answer *'Yes.'* (She has an almost *abnormal* sense of justice for a woman, you know!) To the fourth, she replied in an equally self-sacrificing way, so in the end the man triumphed. But it was this business of the wedding presents which (as I've explained to you now) he deliberately *took back* (we Americans call this being an 'Indian giver'!) that has made Marise think he's in love with someone.

"I may have guessed the person in her mind; but, as you will feel no interest in *that* side of the subject, I'll not bore you by dwelling on it at present. The interest for *you* in Garth's being in love with a woman

who is *not* our Marise (no matter who!) is *obvious.* If the child is right in her conjectures, she is also right, no doubt, in asserting that she need have no fear the man will lose his head.

"In reading over what I have just written, I see that I may have given you a wrong impression. It sounds as if I had resigned myself to see Marise go off to live alone with Garth in his house by the abyss. Which is not the case, of course. I shall be with her. That is, I shall be most of the time—the best bargain I can drive! Except that, naturally, Céline will *always* be with her. And if Garth is a Demon, Céline can be a dragon. She has learned this art from *Me.* She is absolutely faithful, and devoted to *your* interests. In order to make sure of her services when needed in any possible emergency, I have more or less confided in her, which I think was wise.

"Now, before I write further, I will set your mind at rest as far as *possible.*

"Garth has used the power he holds to the uttermost, and no entreaties on the part of author or manager have moved him. Marise is to give up the part of Dolores in a fortnight, and Susanne Neville begins rehearsing to-morrow! Poor Sheridan, poor Belloc! Poor *play!* Poor *public!* My daughter is immediately after to start for the West with her 'husband'—and maid! I wished to be of the party, but Garth brutally inquired if 'that sort of thing was done in the smart set'—mothers-in-law accompanying bridal pairs on their honeymoon? If I wanted gossip, there would be a good way to get it, he said. He is continually throwing gossip in our faces, whenever we propose anything he doesn't like!

"After a most exhausting (to *me*) argument, it was settled that I should remain in New York for a few days

after their departure, and that I should then leave also, going straight on to Los Angeles. There I will open beautiful Bell Towers, and see that all is ready for your advent, with the invalid. Meanwhile Marise is to visit some sort of female named Mooney, an adopted mother of Garth. She lives near a town called Albuquerque, which if I don't forget is in New Mexico. You can perhaps look it up on the map. Garth appears to have cause for gratitude to this woman, who is an elderly widow. He has spent some years (I don't know how many, and do not care!) in that State and the neighbouring one of Arizona; and I gather from one or two words he let drop that he gave Mrs. Mooney the house she now owns. In any case, he said he *must* pay her a visit, not having seen her since the time when he joined the British forces at the beginning of the war. And if *he* went, his wife would have to go with him!

"The man evidently expected that Marise would object; but in the circumstances the idea seemed quite a *good* one! You see *why,* of course, dear Tony? This old woman will be an extra chaperon for our girl, whose wild impulsiveness has brought so much worry and trouble to us all. Garth cannot make scenes before his foster-mother, for the very shame of it!

"After a short visit there, he will take Marise and Céline to his own place: and you may be sure I shall not be long in joining my child, to give her my protection!

"Do, my dear son-to-be, hurry on your marriage. You must cable me the moment you get this, when you are likely to arrive, addressing me here, where I shall still be at that time. All our difficulties will end when you are able to hand Garth the million dollars. (I *quite* understand it would be imprudent to send a cheque or a letter to him. Who knows what desperate

thing he might do when he had got the money?) The one safe thing will be a *conversation,* and the money in bonds. Then, as you suggested, you can dictate a document for Garth to sign, compromising to *him* but not to you. You can also dictate terms—as you would have done from the first, if Marise had not tried to punish you—by punishing *herself!* But oh, let it be soon—soon! The strain is telling upon my nerves—and no doubt the nerves of Marise, though she is singularly reserved with me, I regret to say—one would almost think *sulky,* poor child!

"I can't express the pain it gives me to upset you with all these anxieties. But I dared not keep silence, lest you should learn of this journey West, and so on, through some garbled story in the newspapers. You might then think the *worst;* whereas now, you are in the secret of your dear girl's *safety.* No harm will come to her: and thank goodness there will be no tittle-tattle to rouse Mr. Ionides's suspicions!

"I presume you will marry your cousin by special licence, so as to hurry things on; and I comfort myself by thinking that before many days all will be *en train.* Perhaps in a fortnight after you reach England you will be arranging to leave again for the benefit of the invalid's health. California is the most wonderful place in the world for a cure. But, of course, the poor Œnone is incurable, and is not likely to be with you on this earth for more than a year or two at worst—I mean, at most.

"When you have settled with Garth, he will have no further excuse to assert himself. I shall find a house near Bell Towers, and Marise will come to me. The time of waiting for happiness will pass in the consolation of warm platonic friendship and lovely surround-

ings. An excuse can be found for Marise's divorce; and Garth will pass out of our lives for ever!

"Now I have explained everything as well as I can, and I shall add items of interest each day until time comes for posting my letter. *Au revoir,* dear Tony! Yours, M. S.—the initials you love!"

CHAPTER XXV

"SOME DAY—SOME WAY—SOMEHOW!"

IF Zélie Marks had been a malicious girl she could, with a few words through the telephone or on paper, have spoiled at a stroke such few chances of happiness as remained to Garth.

The man was completely, almost ludicrously in her power; and Zélie didn't flatter herself that what he had done was done entirely because of trust in her. He *did* trust her, of course. But as the girl set forth to carry out his wishes, she realised that he had turned to her as much through a man's blindness as through perfect faith in her unfailing friendship.

Friendship! She laughed a little at the word, travelling westward in the luxurious stateroom for which Garth had paid. What a dear fool he was! But all men were like that. When they fell head over heels in love with one woman, they never bothered to analyse the feelings of any other female thing on earth!

Yes, that was about all she was in his eyes—a female thing! He had been in desperate need of help, and she happened to be the one creature who could give the kind he wanted.

Some girls would have refused, she thought. Others would have accepted, and then—behaved like cats. Even she had longed to behave like a cat when she talked to his "wife" through the telephone. "If Marise Sorel dreamed of what he's asked me to do, not one of the things he hopes for could ever by any possibility

come to pass," Zélie reminded herself, as she gazed without seeing it at the flying landscape. "Not that they ever will come to pass anyhow. But it shan't be *my* fault that he's disappointed."

Miss Marks honestly believed that she was unselfish in her service; yet something far down in the depths of her prayed to gain a reward for it in the far, far future.

The one thing which seemed certain about this wild marriage was, that it wouldn't last. Sooner or later—probably sooner!—there'd be a divorce. Then, maybe, Jack Garth would remember what his pal Zélie Marks had done for him. He'd turn to her for comfort as now he turned for help. Love—real love—was sometimes born in such ways: and Zélie didn't for an instant let herself think that Garth's love for Marise Sorel was *real*. It was infatuation, and was bound to pass when he found out what a vain, self-centred girl his idol was; whereas Zélie Marks had been loyally his chum for years.

Zélie had loved Garth long before the war, when she knew him in Albuquerque. She was learning stenography then, after her father died, and when there was no one for her to live with except an aunt. The aunt was quite a good aunt, and a friend of Mrs. Mooney—Jack's "Mothereen"; but Zélie had wanted to be independent. Jack and Mothereen had been kind to the girl; and when Jack began building a house near his beloved Grand Canyon, for a little while Zélie had tremblingly prayed that it was meant for her to live in. Later, she had begun to lose hope, but not wholly. And then the war had broken out in Europe. Almost at once Garth had dashed over to England and offered his services, on the plea that his father, a Yorkshire man, had never been naturalised as an American.

Zélie couldn't rest in Albuquerque after that. She went east, and would quietly have slipped away after Garth to Europe as a Red Cross nurse if she hadn't been afraid he would suspect why she followed. Instead, she stopped in New York, and got work as a stenographer with a firm of engineers, thanks to an introduction from Jack. When America flung herself into the war-furnace too, Zélie Marks did train as a nurse: but in little more than a year came the Armistice, and the girl reluctantly took up her old profession again.

Now, she loved Major Garth, V.C., a hundred times more than she had loved Jack Garth, the smart young inventor. Yet here she was on the way to Arizona, where she had promised to go and get his house (that house she had once thought might be hers!) ready to receive another woman!

When he had come to her flat early in the morning and told her what he wanted done to "surprise Marise," she had made him some hot coffee, and agreed to everything.

"Yes, Jack," she said, "I'll do it, and your wife shall never know, unless you tell her yourself. And I advise you not to do that, because if you drop the least hint, she'll hate the house and me, and be angry with you. Any girl *would!* I'm not blaming her. She shall think that your house was just waiting, in apple-pie order, her room and all: or else—yes, *that* would be best!—she shall think Mothereen did the whole business. Of course, that's what you'd want Mothereen to do, and what she'd want to do, if she were strong enough for the task. But as it is, she shall work just enough, so that she won't have to *fib*—no hard work to tire her out. She'll love to go to the Canyon with me—the dear Mothereen!—and she'll have the time of her life."

So that was Zélie Marks' secret errand. She was to travel straight through to Kansas City, by the Santa Fé "Limited." There she was to pause in her journey and purchase a list of things which had never been supplied for Garth's new house, finished only a short time before the war: beautiful silver, crystal and fine linen, and the decorations for a room worthy of a bride like Marise. Kansas City was a big enough town to provide these things, Garth thought; and as it was many hours nearer the Grand Canyon than was Chicago, Zélie's purchases would reach their destination sooner than if she shopped there.

Garth had to leave much to Zélie's taste, but his advice, "Try to think what *she* would like," had hurt. Zélie was to have all the trouble and pain, yet must strive to please Marise Sorel, not herself. And poor old Zélie was never to get any credit for the sacrifice!

Of course, she *had* got something. She had got Jack's thanks in advance. He had said, "You're a brick, Zélie! The finest girl there is. I shall never forget what you're doing for me." And she had got the most marvellous jewels she'd ever seen except at the opera or at Tiffany's. But she didn't count them as possessions. She knew they had been refused by Marise (Jack put it casually, "Stuff didn't make a hit there. I hope it will with you!"), and Zélie had no intention of keeping Mrs. Garth's cast-off finery. Just what she would eventually do with what Jack called the "stuff," she hadn't made up her mind: but the girl felt confident of an inspiration.

She had also got money for the trip West, and back, with travel *de luxe*. She didn't mind accepting that, as she was doing an immense favour for Jack, which nobody else could or would do. And she didn't mind his

paying an "understudy" to look after her work at the Belmore till she should return. But she had refused nearly half the money which Jack had pressed upon her. She simply "wouldn't have it!" she'd insisted. He had been forced to yield, or vex her: but he had probably said within himself, "Anyhow, she's got the jewels!"

How little he knew her, if he could think that! . . . And so, after all, the thanks were the biggest part of her reward.

Tears smarted under Zélie's eyelids now and then, as she thought of these things while the train whirled her westward: how loyal she was to her pal, and was going to be in spite of every temptation; how little Marise deserved the worship lavished upon her; and how much more good it would do Jack to give his love in another quarter!

"All the same, I'll do my very, very best," the girl repeated. "I won't tell Mothereen a single *one* of the horrid things I think about the bride. I'll paint her in glowing colours. I'll try and make the house a dream of beauty, no matter how hard I work. I'll warn Mothereen not to mention my name, though I'd *love* to have her blurt it out! But some day—and some way—I'll somehow get even with Marise Sorel for all she's made me suffer. And made *Jack* suffer!"

CHAPTER XXVI

THE END OF THE JOURNEY

MARISE knew as little as possible of her own country. Her early memories wavered between New York when things went well, and Brooklyn or even Jersey City when the family luck was out. Her first experiences on the stage had given her small parts in New York. Mums had refused fairly good chances for the pretty girl, rather than let her go "on the road." Then had come the great and bewildering success as "Dolores," which had kept the young star playing at one theatre until mother and daughter transplanted themselves to England. This "wedding trip" with Garth was the first long journey that Marise had ever made in her native land.

It was the most extraordinary thing which had ever happened, to be travelling with Garth—except being married to him! And, after the first twenty-four hours of "Mrs. John Garthhood," she had not felt "married" at all, during the fortnight which followed the wedding.

For one thing, she had been desperately busy preparing to leave the stage "for good." There were so many people to see! And the person of whom she had seen least was her husband. He, too, appeared to be busy about his own affairs, and Marise was rather surprised to discover how many men (his acquaintances were nearly all men, and men of importance) he knew in New York.

Every night he took her to the theatre, and returned to escort her home in the car he had so extravagantly hired. That was in the *rôle* of adoring bridegroom which he had engaged himself to play! But apart from luncheons and dinners eaten with wife and mother-in-law on show in public places, these were the only occasions when they met and talked together. At night, though Marise still stuck to the bargain and occupied her room in the "bridal suite," she never knew when Garth entered his quarters next door, or when he went out. But now, here they were in a train, destined to be close companions for days on end.

The girl's restless fear of the unknown in Garth's nature, which had almost gone to sleep in New York, waked up again. Yet somehow it wasn't as disagreeable as it ought to have been—and indeed, she had rather missed it! There was a stifled excitement in going away with him which interested her intensely; and she was interested in the journey itself.

Garth had made everything very easy and comfortable for his wife, so far as outward arrangements went. She had a stateroom (it happened by chance to be the same in which Miss Marks had travelled a fortnight ago, but Zélie's vows of "getting even" did not haunt the place), and close by, Céline had a whole "section" to herself. Garth lurked in the distance, just where, Marise didn't know. He must, of course, take his bride to meals, and sit chatting with her for some hours each day in her stateroom, lest people who knew their faces should wonder and whisper about the strange honeymoon couple. But so far as Marise could tell, he seemed inclined to keep his word with her.

What would Mums—who had sobbed at parting—think if she knew that her martyred Marise was quite

happy and chirpy? Yet so it was! The girl was keenly conscious of Garth's presence, but she couldn't help being as pleased as a child with the neat arrangement of her stateroom; with the coffee-coloured porter whose grin glittered like a diamond tiara set in the wrong place; with the cream-tinted maid who brought a large paper bag for her toque, and said, "My! ain't your hat just *sweet?*" and with the wee wooden houses they passed so close she could almost have snatched flower-pots from their window-sills, as "Alice" snatched marmalade, falling down to Wonderland through the Rabbit Hole. That was just at the start, for soon the train was flashing through fair green country with little rivers, and trees like English trees.

Marise laughed aloud at the huge advertisements which disfigured the landscape; unpleasant-looking, giant men cut out of wood; Brobdingnag boys munching cakes; profile cows the size of elephants, and bottles tall as steeples. Then suddenly she checked herself. It was the first time she had laughed with Garth! He, too, was smiling. Their eyes met. The man seemed very human for that moment; young, too, and in spite of his bigness, boyish. What would she have thought of him, she wondered, if they had met in an ordinary way?

The train stopped at very few places. Indeed, when in motion it had an air of stopping at nothing! It was fun going to the restaurant car. Men stared at Marise, and she saw that some of the women stared at Garth. Did they admire him? Would *she* have admired him if she'd seen him for the first time as well-dressed as he was now, wearing a smart Guards' tie, and if she had never learned to think of him as a Devil and a Brute?

Certainly his hair was nice. It grew well on his

forehead, and brushed straight back it would have had the effect of a bronze helmet if there hadn't been a slight ripple to break the smoothness.

"Monsieur Garth has received a telegram in the train," said Céline that night as she helped "Madame" to undress. "He has no stateroom himself. I suppose he could not get one. He is in a 'section,' no better than mine. He is sitting there now reading the telegram. I think he has read it several times. Perhaps it is from Madame his mother, whom we go to visit."

"Perhaps," echoed Marise. But somehow she felt sure it wasn't. It wasn't about business, either! Strange that you could get telegrams in trains. He must have told the person to wire; and the person was a woman—Zélie Marks, most likely. All Marise's resentment against Garth came back, as her mother would have wished for Severance's sake.

At Chicago, where they arrived next morning, they had to stop all day until the Santa Fé Limited left at night. Garth took his wife to "see the sights." He was quite agreeable, in an impersonal way, and so was she; but they did not laugh together again. They talked only of the moment, never planned ahead; yet Marise's thoughts kept flying on to the end of the journey, and what life would be like then.

The morning after brought them to Kansas City, where Zélie, bound on her secret mission, had got off to buy beautiful things for the far-away house. But Major and Mrs. John Garth did not get off. They went on and on, till the flat country of waving grass turned to red desert dotted darkly with pines, and having here and there a mysterious mound like an ancient tumulus. Instead of homely villages there were groups of adobe houses, such as Marise vaguely pictured in Africa. Out

of the hard scarlet earth pushed grey rocks like jagged teeth of giant, buried skulls; and at last it seemed that the train was rushing straight to the setting sun where it would be engulfed in fire.

Now and then when the girl glanced at Garth, who was absorbed in the wistful ecstasy of homecoming, it occurred to her that he had changed. His eyes were more tawny than ever they had been. Perhaps it was the red reflection shining up into them! Now she understood better than before why they had looked like the eyes of a lion that sees his lost and distant desert. This was Garth's desert—*his,* and he loved it! A queer little thrill of involuntary sympathy ran through her. She felt that it might be in her also to love this wild rose-red and golden land, with its dark, stunted trees, and the draped Indian figures silhouetted on slim ponies against a crystal sky. It appealed to something in her soul that had never yet found what it wanted. It made her feel that she was very little in her outlook, her aspirations, but that she might some day grow to a stature worth while.

It was morning—late morning—when they reached Albuquerque, once settled and named by Spanish explorers. As the train drew into the station Marise glanced out with veiled eagerness. Yes, she *was* eager, but she didn't want Garth to know that. It would please him too much—more than it was safe to please him, maybe!

There was a surprisingly delightful hotel built in old Spanish style, which seemed to be part of the station itself: and on the platform were knots of Indians so picturesque that the girl nearly cried out in sheer pleasure.

Garth had come into the stateroom to help gather up

her things. She had been wondering for some moments at the strained frown between his eyebrows when he should have been smiling with joy. Suddenly he spoke.

"Marise" (he always called her Marise, and she had ceased to resent it), "there's something I want to ask you to do. I kept putting it off, but now the last minute has come. You know I think a lot of Mrs. Mooney, my adopted mother, don't you?"

"You've told me so. And it goes without saying, as you had an *idée fixe* that you must make her this visit at any cost," Marise replied.

"At any cost—that's just it," he repeated. "Well, she's as old-fashioned as you're new-fashioned. She couldn't understand a motive for marriage except love—she'd hardly believe there was any other! I don't want to shock or worry her if I can avoid it. Will you please help me out in keeping her as happy about—us, as you reasonably can?"

"Of course I don't want to hurt her," said Marise. "I hate hurting people—as a general rule, though you mayn't believe it. What do you want me to do—something special?"

"Yes. Could you bring yourself to call me 'Jack' before her? She'd notice if you always called me 'You,' as you do—as you have since I pointed out that 'Major Garth' didn't fit the situation."

"Certainly. That's easy enough!" Marise reassured him. "I'm not an actress for nothing. Many a man whom I wouldn't dream of calling by his Christian name off the stage has had to be 'dearest' and 'darling' *on!*"

Garth flushed darkly, she could not quite guess why. "Thank you," he said. "We'll consider ourselves in the theatre, then, when we're at Mothereen's, playing—

don't you say?—'opposite' parts. I'll try and make yours not too hard. I don't know whether she'll have come to the depot to meet us or not, but—hurrah, *there* she is!"

His voice rang out as Marise had never yet heard it ring. Yes, she had once—just for an instant—that first Sunday when he said, "I would sell my soul for you!"—or some foolish words of the kind.

Since then, she had forgotten those tones, and thought his voice hard; but now its warmth and mellowness brought back a memory.

The train was stopping. In front of a wonderful window full of Indian curios stood a little woman looking up and waving a handkerchief. She was dressed in black, with the oldest-fashioned sort of widow's bonnet. And if you'd seen her on top of the North Pole, you would have known she was Irish.

Garth flung a window up, and shouted, "Mothereen!"

CHAPTER XXVII

SECOND FIDDLE

THE next thing that Marise knew, she was on the platform, being hugged and kissed by the little woman in black, admired by a pair of big, wide-apart blue eyes under black hair turning grey, smiled at by a kind, sweet mouth whose short upper lip showed teeth white as a girl's.

Not even Mums had ever hugged or kissed Marise like that! There had always been just a perceptible holding at a distance lest hair or laces should be rumpled. But there was no dread of rumpling here! Marise knew that Mrs. Mooney wouldn't have cared if her hair had come down or her funny old bonnet had been squashed flat. There was something oddly delicious, almost pathetic—oh, but *very* pathetic as things really were between her and Garth!—in being taken to that full, motherly bosom where the heart within beat like the wings of a glad bird. Suddenly—perhaps because she was tired and a little nervous after her immense journey—Marise wanted to cry in the nice woman's neck, which smelt good, like some sort of warm, fresh fruit. But she didn't cry. She smiled, and behaved herself well, as Mrs. Mooney turned her affectionate attentions to "Johnny."

"Sure, boy," she said, when Garth had come in for a full share of caresses, "your bride's beautiful. You didn't tell me *half,* and neither did——"

But Mothereen broke off short, and squeezed the gloved hands of Marise, shaking them up and down to cover an instant's confusion. She had been solemnly warned by Zélie that the name of Marks was taboo, and now she had nearly let it out!

"There's an automobile waiting," she hurried on. "Not that I've got one, or the likes of one, meself, but ye're from N'York, me dear, and I felt it would be the right thing to have."

"So it is, Mothereen," said Garth. "Now I'll just get the 'shuvver' to help me with our bags and things——"

"Not yet, boy, please," she begged excitedly. "There's a lot of folks waitin' for the good word with ye, the minute we've had our meetin' over. I couldn't keep 'em from comin', Johnny, honest I couldn't, try as I might. I believe if we had a carriage instead of an auto to drive home in, they'd take out the horses and draw ye along themselves, singin' 'Hail the Conquerin' Hero'!"

As if her words were a signal, a crowd of men and women, mostly young, burst out from the hotel, or from the Indian museum with its window display of brilliant rugs, totems, turquoises, black opals, and chased silver. "Hurrah for our Jack! Hurrah for our V.C.!" they yelled.

Marise was taken aback and hardly knew what to do. It was so odd to hear roars of applause which were not for *her!*

It wasn't that she wanted the roars, or envied the embarrassed recipient of the unexpected honours; but it *was* strange to stand there—she, the famous and beautiful Marise Sorel—with no one looking at or thinking anything about her at all.

Garth *was* a V.C., of course, and worthy of praise

for brave deeds he must have done (she'd never heard what they were, or thought very much about them!), yet it did seem funny, just for the first surprised moment, that these creatures should be so wild over him without caring an atom for her!

"Oh, darlint, and ain't we two women proud of him!" gasped Mothereen, squeezing the girl's arm convulsively.

Marise glanced down at the plump, black-clad form quivering with emotion at the sight of Garth being shaken hands with and pounded on the back. "Yes, we are," she echoed kindly, for she would not have pained the dear woman for anything on earth.

"I shall have my work cut out for me, while I'm in her house, if she expects me to be chorus for her adopted son," the transported favourite told herself. "But she is a darling, and I'll do my best for the few days I'm here, at—well, at *almost* any price."

When Garth's old friends had thrown themselves upon him like a tidal wave, the reflex action came, and they were willing to meet and be nice to his wife. Male and female, they saw that she was tremendously pretty and smart. Many knew who she was, and had heard of her success, even though they had never seen her on the stage. But what was a star of the theatre, compared with a hero of the war? Garth was It. Marise was only It's second fiddle.

"Isn't he great?—fine?—wonderful?" were the adjectives flung at her head by gushing girls. "I suppose he lets you wear his V.C.?" a man pleasantly condescended. Everyone was sure, as Mothereen had been sure, that she must be "very proud" of the splendid husband she'd been lucky enough to catch.

Marise smiled as she pictured what Mums' expression

would have been among these adorers of the Fiend, the Brute, beings from another world, for whom the celebrated Miss Sorel was nobody. Really, the scene on this platform was like a village green in a comic opera, with all the minor characters dancing round the tenor!

At last Garth—happy yet ill at ease and half ashamed—contrived to rescue his mother and wife. They got to the motor-car waiting outside the station; but there they collided with a new procession, belated yet enthusiastic. It was, "Garth forever!" again: more shouts of joy, more slaps, more introductions to the harmless, necessary bride.

Even when the three had ambushed themselves in the car, boys hung on behind, singing, "For he's a jolly good fellow!" and girls threw flowers in at the windows.

"This is the happiest hour of my life since I first met up with ye, Johnny dear," choked Mothereen, wiping her smiling eyes. "And I'm sure it's the same for you, isn't it, my child?"

"Oh yes—ye-es!" responded Marise.

Garth laughed.

The town of Albuquerque was very Spanish-looking. Indeed, it would have been strange if it were not so, since the Spanish had built much of it in the Great Days of their prime, hundreds of years ago. It was on the outskirts of the place that Mrs. Mooney lived, in a house—as she explained to Marise—"architected for her by Johnny himself."

"He and I lived here together after he brought me back to me dearly-loved west, from N'York," she went on; "as happy as turtle-doves till the war broke on us. That house at the Canyon where he's takin' you—the later the better, because I want to keep ye here as long as I can!—was never for *me*. He thought he'd like to

go and brood over his work in it, all alone, once or twice a year. He felt as if that Grand Canyon would be a kind of inspiration. I doubt if it ever popped into his head in those times that he'd be takin' a pretty young wife like a princess from a fairy tale there some day. Not that aught except a fairy-tale princess would be good enough for him."

Marise did not answer. What was there to say? But they had arrived at Mothereen's house.

It, too, was Spanish, in a modern, miniature way, and Mothereen explained it to Marise. "Johnny wanted to build me something bigger and more statuesque like," she said. "But I wouldn't let him. I love a little house. I'm at *home* in it. I have no grand ways. I hope it's the same with you, me dear! Though for sure it will be, on yer honeymoon, with the best boy in the wurruld, just back safe from the terrible war! Zé—I mean *he*—did speak of a 'suite' to put the two of ye up in, but I warrant ye won't be the one to say yer quarters are too small! . . . Come in, will ye? And welcome ye both are as the sunshine after rain!"

Marise obeyed the arm round her waist, but a presentiment of trouble was upon the girl. She foresaw a dilemma. And it had two long horns. She was between them!

CHAPTER XXVIII

MOTHEREEN

MOTHEREEN led them over the house, which was built in bungalow style, all on one floor, saying to Garth, "Do you remember this? Do you remember that?" and pointing out to Marise details upon which she could hang some anecdote of "Johnny."

"But I've saved the best for the last," she announced. "Now I'm going to take ye to your *'suite,'* as Zé—as it's fashionable to call it. Ye know, Johnny, the spare bedroom with the bath openin' out? Well, I've added onto it the little sewin'-room, done up the best I could in a hurry. And if that doesn't make a 'suite,' what *does?* There's no door from one room into the other, that's the trouble! I'd a' had one cut if there'd been time, but there wasn't. Still, it's the next room, and the two of ye will have the whole use of it, so I hope the dear gurrl will excuse the deficiencies."

"I'm sure there won't be any deficiencies!" exclaimed Marise graciously. Garth was right to love his "Mothereen"! She was certainly an adorable woman, and too delicious when she rolled out a long word. The girl was pleased to hear that there was no door between her room and Garth's. Not that he was likely to annoy her. But—who could tell if he would not be different here in his own home, where everyone made a hero of him, from what he had seemed in *her* New York? It was just as well that she was to be on the safe side.

"What a pretty room!" she cried out, as, with a

proud housewifely look, Mothereen flung open a door. "Why, it's lovely! Is this mine?"

"Of course it's yours, darlin'—yours and Johnny's," said Mothereen, beaming with pleasure at such praise. "Come and look out of the window, ducky. John knows what's there, but 'twill be a surprise for you."

Still clasped by the plump arm, Marise crossed the polished floor, which was spread with beautiful Indian rugs. The walls were white, and hung with a few good pictures of desert scenery and strange Indian mesas. The furniture was simple, but interesting: made of eucalyptus wood, pink as faded rose-leaves against its white background; and everywhere were bowls of curious Egyptian-looking Indian pottery, filled with roses. The one immense window took up nearly all one end of the room, and opened Spanish fashion upon a garden-court with a fountain, a marble bench, and a number of small orange trees grouped together to shade the seat.

"'Twas Johnny's idea," Mothereen explained, when Marise had complimented the court. "The next room looks on it, too. And now ye'd both better come and see what I've done with that same!"

She led the way out again, and opened the door of an adjoining room. "I do hope ye'll like it too!" she said. "It's yer own little sittin'-room, and you two turtle-doves can have yer breakfast here by yerselves if ye like."

With all her goodwill towards "Mothereen," Marise could not repress a slight gasp, or a stiffening of the supple young figure belted by the kind woman's arm; for her first glimpse of the room gave her an electric shock. The room *was* a "sittin'-room," and nothing else.

"Is anything wrong, darlin'?" anxiously asked Mothereen.

Marise hesitated. Involuntarily she glanced over her shoulder at Garth, who was close behind. She met his eyes, which implored hers.

"Oh no, indeed!" the girl protested. "It's—it's charming. I was thinking of something else for an instant."

"Ye're *sure* everything's all right?" Mothereen persisted, her pretty brows puckered.

"Quite sure. Thank you *so* much!"

"Nothing ye'd like to have me change?"

"Nothing at all," Marise consoled her, in a strained tone.

"Well then, I'm glad, and I'll leave ye to yerselves for a while. Come out to me when ye feel like it and not before—one or both. And ye'll be welcome as the flowers in May."

She kissed Marise and snuggled her cheek, rosy and fresh as an apple, against the arm of her adopted son. Then she was gone with a parting smile, and Garth shut the door.

"That was mighty fine behaviour of yours, and I thank you with all my heart," he said to Marise.

She had dropped into a chair, tremulous about the knees. "You needn't thank me," she answered. "What I did was for *her*."

"I know. That's why I thank you," said Garth. "I think a lot more about Mothereen's feelings than I do my own. Mine are case-hardened—hers aren't, and never could be. You see, she's fond of me."

"I do see! So is everybody else—here, it seems."

"They're warm-hearted folks out in the West. They love to make a noise. I hope you weren't disgusted."

"No, I liked them," said Marise. "They seemed so sincere. And Mrs. Mooney is the dearest little woman. I'd have my tongue cut out—almost!—rather than she should be sad. But now the question is, what's to be done? I tried to help you. You must help me."

"I will," Garth assured her. "It's going to be all right."

"But how—without hurting her?" Marise looked round the room. "You can't sleep on that little sofa."

"I can sleep on the floor rolled up in a blanket. That would have seemed a soft billet in France."

"You'd be wretchedly uncomfortable. And how would you bathe?"

"I guess you don't need to worry yourself about that detail. I'll manage the business in one way or other."

"That sounds vague! What's become of the room which used to be yours in this house, before you went to the war?"

"Your bedroom next door is the one. The only spare room we had in those days was this, where we're sitting now. We never had any people come to stay, though, so Mothereen turned it into a sewing-room."

"I see! And you can't slip out to an hotel or anywhere, because every human being in town knows you."

"No, I can't slip out. But—well, we *are* married!"

Marise started, and stared. Her eyes opened wide. She looked ready to spring up and run away.

"All I was going to say is this," Garth went on. "There's a big screen or two in your room, I noticed. Perhaps, as you're kind enough not to want me to go unwashed, you'd stretch a point, and let me walk through to the bath with a couple of screens in position. We needn't stay more than two days and nights, the way things have turned out. Mothereen will be disap-

pointed, but her feelings won't be hurt because I shall take steps to get a wire from a friend of mine at the Grand Canyon. The friend will tell me that I'm needed at once on a matter of importance. That'll do the trick. And Mothereen can make up for lost time by visiting me —us, at Vision House."

"Vision House!"

"Yes, I named it that. You wouldn't be interested in the reason why."

Marise felt that she would be interested, but didn't care to say so.

"You wouldn't mind her coming to the Canyon?" he asked.

"Of course not! I should be delighted. That is, if I were there."

"You would be there."

"I mightn't. You see—things will change. Mums will come, and—and—I shall go away—with her. You know what will happen."

"Who knows anything about the future? But let it take care of itself. There's plenty to think of in the present, isn't there?"

"Too much!"

"Not for me. Can you bring yourself to agree to that plan I proposed? The screen——"

"Oh, I suppose it's the only thing to do! I've played bedroom scenes on the stage, and this——"

"Very well. That's settled, then."

"Ye-es. Except—about your belongings. I suppose Mrs. Mooney is sure to run in now and then to see how —we—are getting on."

"I'm afraid she will. Unless we tell her to stay out."

"We won't do that! I suppose your toilet things

will have to be in *my* room—on that tallboy with the mirror which Mrs. Mooney evidently meant for them."

"If you can bear the contamination!"

Marise glanced at him. But he did not speak the words bitterly. He was faintly smiling, though it was not precisely a gay smile. She wanted to smile back, but feared to begin again with "smiling terms," so she replied gravely that it could be quite well arranged. "I'll explain—enough—to Céline, and she'll unpack for you," the girl suggested.

"That's a kind thought!" said Garth. And then, as if satisfied with the way in which troublesome matters had shaped themselves, he got up. "I expect you'd like to have your maid in now, to help you," he suggested. "You can ring, and I'll go and have a chin with Mothereen."

Céline was lodged at a distance, but there was a bell communicating with her quarters. She came, in an excited mood.

"But it is a house of charm, Madame!" she exclaimed. (It had ceased to seem strange, now, being "Madamed" by Céline.) "Monsieur Garth—the two domestics who have for him an adoration, say he built it. And he has another place larger and more beautiful, where we go. It is, then, that Monsieur is rich."

Marise did not answer. But she would have given something to do so, out of her own knowledge. Garth and all his circumstances, and surroundings, were becoming actually mysterious to her. She was puzzled at every turn.

"You mustn't gossip with the servants here, Céline," she said.

"But no, naturally not, Madame!" protested the

maid. "I will listen to all they say, and speak nothing in return. So Madame wishes the effects of Monsieur placed in this room? *Parfaitement!* It shall be done."

Luncheon was outwardly a happy meal. Mothereen so radiated joy in her adored one's return that Marise was infected with her gaiety of spirit. After all, life was only one adventure after another, and this was an adventure like the rest. Well, not exactly *like* the rest! But at least, it was not dull!

All the afternoon there were callers, and Mothereen broke it to the bride and bridegroom that, without being disagreeable, she could not avoid inviting a "few folks to dinner, and some to drop in later." "The dinner ones are our grand people," she explained to Marise, "the Mayor and his wife, and a son who is a Colonel. He has married a French wife. She is very stylish, and she'll have on her best clothes to-night. They say she's got grand jewels. But sure, they won't hold a candle to yours."

"I haven't brought many with me, I'm sorry to say," replied Marise.

Mothereen's face fell for an instant, then brightened. "Oh, I clean forgot," she exclaimed. "The beautiful things I have waitin' fur ye. They'll be on yer dressin'-table to-night. Now, not a wurrud, darlin'! Ask me no questions, I'll tell ye no lies. This is a *secret.*"

Intrigued, Marise became impatient to go to her room, but could not escape there till it was time to dress. Céline was already on the spot, preparing her mistress's dress for the evening: bridal white frock, scintillating with crystal; little slippers, silk stockings, a petticoat of rose-embroidered chiffon and lace.

But Marise did not cast a glance at these things. She

walked straight to the dressing-table, and couldn't help giving a little squeak. For there lay the missing jewel-cases—those she had thrown into the corridor at the Plaza Hotel on her wedding night—and had never seen since.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE WHITE DOVE

MARISE and Garth neatly arranged their life according to stateroom etiquette on shipboard. When one was in the bedroom the other was in the sitting-room next door. They were like the figures of the man and woman who come out and go in at the adjacent doors of a barometer; and the plan, though inconvenient, was not unworkable. When the girl had opened the jewel-cases and gazed once more at the glories she had thought lost forever to her repentant eyes, she couldn't resist tapping on the wall with a gold-backed hair-brush—one Garth had given her. Indeed, she did not stop to think better of the impulse.

Her heart—or some distantly related muscles round the organ—had suddenly warmed towards the man. This thaw was doubtless produced by remorse. For she had believed, on no evidence save instinct, that he had given these lovely things—*her* wedding presents, although discarded!—to Zélie Marks. Instead, he must have expressed them to Mrs. Mooney in order that she —Marise—should have a chance to change her mind. Foxy of him, because it would be difficult to refuse the gifts again, coming as they did from the innocent hands of Mothereen! However, she would see. She'd have a talk with Garth, and then decide.

Garth was in the sitting-room, pretending to himself that he was interested in the evening paper. He jumped

up at the sound of a tap on the wall, hardly believing his own ears. But a knock at Marise's door brought a "Come in!" which did not sound grudging.

Marise in a so-called *robe de chambre* was more dressed than in "Dolores's" third act ball-gown at the theatre, yet there was such a bizarre touch of intimacy in being admitted to this bedroom scene on the stage of life that numerous volts of electricity seemed to shoot through Garth's nerves. His face was composed, however, even stolid. "You wanted me?" he asked.

Marise didn't directly answer that question. She pointed to the jewel-cases. "Mrs.—Mooney put these here," she said. "I—wanted to tell you I'm glad they weren't stolen or—anything."

Her words gave him time to swallow his surprise, which was quite as great as her own had been at sight of the jewels. But he guessed at once what had happened. What a trump Zélie was! A grand girl! She'd make a fine wife for someone. He'd been a clumsy ass to force these things upon her in a moment of fury against Marise; and Zélie had done exactly right. He was immensely grateful. Some day he must find a way to repay her for silently handing him a big chance—a chance that might mean a lot, which but for her thought, her generosity, he would have missed.

Well, it was up to him not to miss it now! He'd been an idiot over these baubles once. He mustn't "fall down" over them again; and to let Marise guess how he'd bungled—how a girl she didn't appreciate yet had straightened matters out—would be to prove himself a priceless ass.

"Thank you for saying that," he quietly replied.

"I did tell you once before that I was sorry I'd thrown the jewel-cases on the floor. It was *horrid* of

me. I felt afterwards I'd been most ill-bred," vouchsafed Marise.

"No. More like a bad-tempered child," said Garth.

"You weren't nice to me when I tried to apologise," the girl went on.

"Were you trying to apologise? Sorry! I didn't understand."

"What did you think I was trying to do?"

"Did you ever see a small boy take a stick, and stir up some beast in its cage at a Zoo? If you did, you'll know."

Marise laughed. "What sort of a beast?"

"Any sort with a sore head."

"Well—to change the subject," she said rather hastily, "let's talk not about beasts, but about jewels. I've apologised. And now officially I put these valuable things into your hands."

"I'd rather leave them in yours," said Garth.

"But—I told you before I really couldn't keep them—in the circumstances."

"Haven't the circumstances changed—just a little?"

"I—don't quite see how you mean."

"Don't you? In that case, I suppose they haven't. Won't *you* change, then—enough to keep the things, as I've no use for them?"

"I'm afraid I can't. You may have a use for them some day, you know."

"What use? I don't seem to see Mothereen in pearls and laurel wreaths."

The picture called up made them both smile. "No, but you won't—won't be bound to me for ever," Marise explained, her cheeks growing pink. "There'll be some other girl; a girl that perhaps you haven't even met, yet——"

"Never on God's earth will there be a girl for me, that I haven't met."

Remembrance of a girl he *had* met darted through the mind of Marise. Zélie Marks! Was the same thought in his mind? she wondered.

"Who can tell about these things?" she murmured vaguely. "Anyhow, you must please take charge of your jewels now."

"But you said this morning you wouldn't like to hurt Mothereen's feelings."

"What have her feelings to do with the jewels?"

"Just this. She's been keeping them for the great day—the day of our coming. She knows they were my wedding present to you——"

"Then she knows that you were shockingly extravagant."

"Perhaps she doesn't think so. She's better acquainted with my circumstances than you are. Anyhow, she's looking forward to seeing you all dolled up in the things to-night, and it'll be a blow for her if you're not. She won't say a word to you. Only she's sure to ask me——"

"Oh, all right! I'll wear the lot!" snapped Marise. She spoke rather crossly, but Garth was not dashed. He was, indeed, happier than he had been since his wedding day. His dummy hand might have scored a success once or twice before during the strange fortnight they had passed together, yet a world apart. He wasn't certain. But he was certain of this: it was a small triumph. He had a "hunch" that, when the girl had once seen herself in the pearls, the pendant, and the wreath of emerald laurel leaves, she wouldn't be anxious to give them up.

"That's very good of you," he thanked her formally.

"I'm obliged to you for Mothereen's sake as well as—but no matter for the rest. It's nothing to you, of course."

As he spoke, Garth walked to the door without waiting for a hint from Marise. "You'll want to go on dressing," he said, "so as to leave the place clear for me." Then, without another word, he went out and shut the door.

Marise stared at herself in the mirror. "You might have two noses—or none—for all the notice he took of your looks," she told her reflection.

History repeated itself that evening. The guests were all hero-worshippers, as the crowd had been at the station. The bride was admired. No one could help admiring her. Face, figure, hair, clothes, and jewels were all wonderful. But even those who seemed to admire her most blatantly betrayed their opinion that she was a lucky girl to have got Jack Garth—she, only an actress!

Some of the people had come a long distance to welcome home the V.C. from the great war, and among these were a young couple who interested Marise, because they appeared so frankly in love with each other. What their last name was, she didn't learn. Mothereen must have thought that she had heard of them from Garth. "Here are Billy and Cath," she introduced them, adding, "This is our dear Marise."

Billy was in the Army, and had fought in France when America "went in." He was stationed somewhere—Marise didn't know where—and Cath had been a "war bride." She looked delicate, though pretty; and another girl whispered to Marise, "Cath was never strong, but when Billy was reported missing a year ago she went right down, and the doctors thought she'd

got T.B. My, you don't know what *T.B.* means? Everyone out here knows only too well, because the climate in these parts and Arizona is so good, lots of 'em come to get cured. Consumption, of course. But joy's the best medicine in the world. You can realise how it would be with you if it had been your gorgeous Jack! I guess Cath will get well now, though she isn't quite right yet—and I don't suppose Billy'd have let her take such a trip for anyone but Jack Garth."

They had motored from "home," wherever that was, in what they called a "tin Lizzie," and Billy had driven the car himself. When everyone else was gone, Cath was still in the house, for there was trouble with "Lizzie," and Garth had gone out with his friend to see what it was.

Cath looked very tired, but her eyes were bright, and a pink flush high on her rather thin cheeks melted into shadows under thick dark lashes. She talked excitedly to Marise about "Jack and Bill," telling the stranger anecdotes which would have thrilled a loving bride, but now and then she glanced wistfully at the door.

At last the two men came back, and the girl half sprang up. "I was getting worried!" she cried. "Is Lizzie going to behave herself?"

"That's what I wish I was sure of," said Billy. "The little brute is in the sulks, and not even Jack can get at the reason, so it must be pretty deep-seated. Still, she may bump us home if I coax her along."

"Good gracious, boy!" exclaimed Mothereen. "That'll never do for Cath! Why, you might be stuck for hours. You and she must stay here and we'll lend you what you need."

"Oh, thank you, darling!" Cath answered. "That would be wonderful. I *am* tired. But are you sure

you've room to squeeze us in, now you've got Jack and his wife with you?"

Mothereen started. "My saints!" she gasped. "I'd forgotten we'd made a suite for them. But that doesn't matter a bit. There'll *be* room. And you'll stop."

Billy and Cath protested. They wouldn't upset the house for worlds. It wasn't so late but Bill could go into the town and knock up the folks at a hotel.

"Nothing of the sort," Mothereen scolded. "We'll have a cot bed put into my room—mine's too narrow for two; and sure I am that Marise won't mind my having a bunk fixed up for the night in her sitting-room."

Fortunately Cath and Bill were both talking too fast at the same time to notice the expression of the bride's face, and Mothereen was looking at them. With all her wish not to hurt Mothereen, the line had to be drawn somewhere. Marise, trying to control her face, glanced at Garth. Her eyes said, "This is up to you. You've got to save me. Think of something, quick!"

"Of course, nobody'll hear of your turning out, Mothereen!" Garth flung himself into the breach. "I expect Marise will invite Cath in to chum with her. Then Bill and I will shift for ourselves. We——"

But an outcry from Cath, Bill, and Mothereen cut his words in two. None of them would hear of such a thing. Part a honeymoon pair like that? Never! It would be a crime.

"Why shouldn't Cath and I have that sitting-room if Mrs. Garth can spare it?" asked Bill.

"We-ell," Mothereen temporised, and glanced with a smile at Marise. "What do you say, darling?"

It was a terrific moment for the girl. It was worse than not knowing your part on the first night of a new

play. Again her eyes turned to Garth. But this time he was caught unprepared. He missed his cue, and looked agonised. Marise believed that he was thinking of Mothereen more than of her. Still, she was sorry for the man. She just couldn't "let him down" before his adored one and his friends. Besides, she had never quite forgotten the ring of his voice on the night after the wedding when he had bidden her trust him. In his strange way—such as it was—he had never failed her since. No, she *wouldn't* let him down!

"What do I say?" she answered Mothereen. "I say 'Yes,' of course. I'm—delighted! Can't we all help to make up their beds, and bring in washstands and things?"

They all did help. And everyone lent Cath and Bill something—"for luck." Garth contributed pyjamas for his friend. Mothereen kept a supply of new toothbrushes of all sizes and qualities. Cath squeaked with joy over the "nighty" Marise offered.

Then at last came the moment for bidding each other "sleep well!—sweet dreams!" The door of Cath and Bill's bedroom shut. Mothereen followed Marise into her quarters adjoining, kissed and complimented her, and called Garth, who was looking at a picture of himself in his first British uniform, enlarged to enormous size in crayon, framed in gilt and hung up in the hall.

"Marise has sent her maid to bed," Mothereen explained. "She was tired after the journey—a train headache. I thought I could undo this lovely wreath for her, but I can't. Will you try?"

Garth tried. He'd never touched the girl's hair before. Its ripples were so soft—so soft! He had not known that a woman's hair could feel so divine as that. For an instant he was afraid that a certain unsteadiness

of his fingers would make him awkward. But he almost prayed that it might not, and the prayer—if it was a prayer—had its answer. He happened to be particularly deft. The emerald laurel wreath yielded its secret to him, and without disturbing one of those wonderful golden waves, he laid the glittering thing on the table.

"Well, I'll say good night, then, me dear ones," said Mothereen. "It's made me as happy as a bird, sure it has, to see your happiness. The Lord is good to us all, He who brought Johnny back, safe and sound, out o' the Furnace. His blessin' on ye both this night!"

Then she was gone.

Her words had brought a sense of peace into the room, as if a white dove had flown in.

CHAPTER XXX

THE VIGIL LIGHT

I'LL go and rouse up one of the hotels," said Garth.

"But you're in evening dress," Marise reminded him. "You can't come back like that in the morning. Besides, what would the people think?"

"Hang the people!" Garth replied.

"One can't—unfortunately."

"Well, here's a better plan. I'll sit outside in the garden court. I can come in—if you'll let me—before there's any chance of being seen."

Marise shivered. "It would be cold!"

"Pooh!" said Garth. "It's never really cold here. Don't forget it wasn't exactly a picnic, those years in France. I don't think I shall ever mind cold again."

"Anyhow, I should feel a brute sleeping calmly here, with you sitting on a hard bench out of doors. I may not be a very nice person," Marise criticised herself, "but I'm not a thorough-paced *pig*. We must think of some other possible arrangement."

"There's only one other possible arrangement. And you'd not consider that possible."

"What is it?" rather breathlessly.

"For you to make yourself comfortable behind a barricade of those two useful screens in your bedroom, while I sit up in an armchair—or spread myself out on this sofa."

"I *do* consider that possible," said Marise, "now I

know what kind of a man you are. That's what we'll do! I'll slip on a dressing-gown and curl up on top of the bed under an eiderdown. And early in the morning the one that's awake will call the other. It's quite simple—and you see I'm not so disagreeable as you thought."

"Have I ever given you cause to believe I thought you disagreeable?"

"Dear me, yes! Whole heaps of times! Not that it matters."

"I suppose it wouldn't matter to you. But it does matter to me, 'what kind of a man' you 'now know' me to be. Have you been studying me? I hadn't noticed it. But if you have, I'd be interested to hear what conclusions you've come to. Do you mind telling me?"

"Oh, my conclusions mostly concern your state of mind regarding *me!*" said Marise.

"What, according to you, is it?"

"Dislike," she replied promptly.

"That's a strong word!" Garth blurted out. They were standing in the middle of the room, eyeing each other as might a pair of duellists obliged to fight over some technical dispute. "Have I been so brutal to you as all that?"

"You haven't been brutal lately. You were—*dreadfully*—at first."

"H'm! You weren't exactly angelic to me."

"There's nothing very angelic in the—in the affair."

"What, precisely, do you mean by 'the affair'?"

"The—er—bargain."

"I thought I'd convinced you that the 'bargain' had collapsed."

"Well, our—marriage, then, if you like that better. I've wondered every minute what you did marry me

for, if it wasn't money. And sometimes I think it couldn't have been, because you seem to have plenty of your own. Still——"

"Some men with plenty could do with more. Is that what you'd say?"

"I'm not sure what I'd say—about you."

"I suppose you think that a million dollars would always be worth having. I'm sure your mother would think that."

"The question is, not what *we'd* think, but what you thought—when you married me."

Garth looked at her for a moment in silence, as if weighing his answer, wondering whether to stick to his fixed plan of remoteness, or risk "giving himself away."

"Do you remember any of the things I said to you the first day we met?" he asked at last.

"Yes, I remember you thought—then—you lo—you admired me a good deal. But you were a different man that day from what you were afterwards."

"You're right! I was. A different man. The word you broke off just now was the one word for what I felt. Only it didn't express half. I loved you with all there was of me. I adored and worshipped you. But—I don't believe you've ever been in love yourself except on the surface, or I'd ask you how much you think love can stand, and live?"

Marise felt the blood pour up to her cheeks and tingle in the tips of her ears. So it was true that he *didn't* love her now! The thought hurt her vanity. She hated to believe that a man who'd loved her once could *un*love her in a few days or weeks. But it annoyed her very much to flush. She wished to look entirely unmoved. Instead, she wanted to cry.

"Please do tell me once for all *why* you married me if

it wasn't either for love or money!" she said crossly, with a quiver in her voice.

"When one makes a bold move on the chessboard—the chessboard of life—there are often several motives," Garth replied. "Sometimes it's to save the queen from being taken by an enemy piece. Perhaps that was my principal motive, who can tell?—I don't know just what piece to compare with Severance, though with a *card* it would be easy. He's not a knight. Nor yet a bishop. We might call him a castle. I hear he's got one—which needs a bit of doing up before it would suit a queen."

"You married me only to keep Tony Severance from getting me?"

"That might have had something to do with it."

"Not for the million?"

"I leave you to guess that, from what you say you know of me."

"And not because you wanted me yourself?"

"I don't get much good from having you, do I?"

"Then it was like the dog in the manger."

Garth shrugged his shoulders. "Let it go at that for to-night, anyhow. We must talk more softly if we don't wish to keep Bill and Cath awake in the next room."

This warning was a dash of cold water!

"We won't talk at all," half whispered Marise. "If you'll arrange the screens for me, I'll rest on the bed."

There were two large, four-leaved screens in the room, one in a corner behind a sofa, keeping off a window draught, one in front of the door. Placed as Garth placed them, they formed a room within a room, hiding the bed from view. Marise stepped behind this "barricade," as Garth had called it, contrived with great difficulty to unfasten a complicated family of tiny hooks,

wriggled out of her sparkling dress and into a *robe de chambre,* turned off the light of an electric candelabrum, turned on that of a green-shaded bedside lamp, and lay down under a silk quilt.

From Garth's part of the room she heard no sound, except when several electric lights were switched off, and Marise imagined him uncomfortably folded up on the sofa which was far too small for what she called "an out-size" of man.

It was dark in the room save for her bedside lamp, the shade of which drank most of the light. So dim was it, so still was it, that after a while Marise grew drowsy.

She hadn't meant to sleep at all, but she realised that Nature was too strong for her. Besides, what did it matter? Garth was probably asleep too—and there were hours before dawn.

The girl ceased to resist the soft pressure as of fingers on her eyelids. They drooped, closed, and—she slept. By and by she dreamed. She dreamed most vividly of Zélie Marks, as she had dreamed once or twice before.

She—Marise—was in this house of Mothereen's; in this very room, though Garth was not with her. He existed, but he had gone out—or away. Marise had taken off the jewels he had given her, and was laying them on a table. They were beautiful! It was a pity not to keep them for her own! Suddenly there was a knock at the door, and without waiting for permission Zélie Marks burst in.

"I've come for the jewels," she announced, in a hateful voice, looking at Marise with angry, wicked eyes.

"They're not yours, and you're not to have them," said Marise in the dream. She spoke with courage; but suddenly she was afraid of Zélie. She knew that the girl meant to do her harm. Some dreadful thing was

going to happen. But her voice was gone. She could not cry out. She couldn't even speak. It was impossible to move. She felt like a bird fascinated by a snake. The dream had become a nightmare.

Zélie saw her helplessness. The big black eyes became more and more evil. The girl advanced slowly, yet with set purpose. Without removing her stare from Marise's face, she picked up the rope of pearls.

"As you won't give these to me, though Jack wants me to have everything of his, I'm going to make you swallow them," she said in a low voice, cold as the tinkle of ice.

Marise strove with all her might to cry out, "No—no!" but could not. She tried to turn and dart away before Zélie could touch her, but she was immovable as the pillar of salt that had been Lot's wife.

Zélie took a handful of pearls and began stuffing them into Marise's mouth. It was suffocation! Marise wrenched herself free of the frozen spell and uttered a shriek.

It waked her; and at the same time she was conscious of another sound—a sound which brought back to her brain a whirling vision of things as they really were.

She remembered the screens, and why they were there.

Garth had bounded up from some resting-place and had knocked over a chair. He must think, either that she was *in extremis,* or else that she had cried out as an excuse to bring him to her. She saw one of the two screens sway, as if Garth had struck against it inadvertently. Then, hastily she closed her eyes. He must be made to realise that she had truly screamed in her sleep, and that there was no horrid coquettish trick.

Marise lay quite still, so that she hardly breathed;

and Garth's steps made scarce a sound; yet she knew that he had come round the screens and was looking at her.

After the things he had said, she was wild to know *what that look was like.* If she could see his face at that moment, when she'd just given him a fright, she would know without any possible doubt whether he'd spoken the plain truth in hinting (he hadn't exactly *said!*) that he didn't love her because she had tried him too far. But she couldn't see his face without opening her eyes; and if she opened her eyes he'd know she was awake. He'd suspect that she had screamed on purpose.

The girl tried to breathe with long, gentle sighs, hardly moving her breast, as she did when she played the part of a sleeper on the stage. It was easy enough *there;* but she couldn't be a good actress after all, because she was unable to control her breath now. Her heart was beating fast, and her bosom rose and fell in jerks.

A long time seemed to pass. Was Garth standing there gazing down at her still, or had he tiptoed away? Marise simply *had* to know! Surely she could just peep from under those celebrated eyelashes of hers for half a second, without his catching her in the act, if he were there?

The lashes flickered, and were still again. But Marise had seen. Garth *was* there. He was looking down at her. Yet all her subtleties had been vain. She couldn't read his face. It was as inscrutable as that of the Sphinx, which she knew only from photographs. Presently she heard a slight, almost indefinable sound, and peeping again, saw Garth in the act

of disappearing behind a leaf of the taller screen. Had he caught that tell-tale flicker, or not?

Garth went back to his darkened corner of the room, but his brain felt as it had been brilliantly lit up, with a hundred electric candles suddenly turned on in it. They dazzled him. But he composed himself outwardly and lay down again on the crampingly short sofa.

He had taken off collar, tie, coat and waistcoat, slipping on instead a futurist dressing-gown which a haughty salesman in a smart shop had forced upon him as *"the* thing." Zélie would probably have approved it. In any case, it would have graced a Russian ballet.

Minutes, hours perhaps, passed before he felt even somnolent. But the ring of light on the ceiling above Marise's concealed lamp, resembling a faint, round moon in a twilight sky, hypnotised him. At last sleep caught him like a wrestler, and downed him for a moment. In a flash came a dream. He thought that Marise had cried out again. Then he waked, in another flash, and knew that it was not true. Vividly he saw her face, as it had been in that last glimpse he had stolen; sweet as a rose; lips apart, long lashes shadowing the cheeks; then—a flicker; and he saw the bosom that had been shaken all through the silent scene with heart-beats too quick for those of a sleeper.

With this photograph upon his retina, he deliberately rolled off the sofa, and fell with a bump on the floor.

Crash! went a screen.

Marise was beside him.

"Are you *dead?*" she gasped.

"No. Only asleep," he answered with a yawn.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE ALBUM

THE next day Garth received a telegram urging him to come at once to the Grand Canyon. He was needed because of some work at Vision House which had been stopped for his decision.

Marise believed that he had had the message sent to himself, and was grateful, for his departure relieved the situation. Later, she thought differently; but at the time she was pleased with the man. She even gave him a little appreciative squeeze of the hand when they said good-bye.

Garth was to be gone two days. He would then return, travelling at night, and after a few hours with Mothereen would take his wife and her maid away. Considering the circumstances, this was as good an arrangement as could have been hoped for by Marise. His absence, however, did leave the house very dull! Whether one liked Jack Garth or not, even if one hated him, his was a personality that made itself missed.

Of course, it was very unpleasant that she had to go and live in his house. In his rough-hewn fashion, he'd been rather decent in some ways, not abusing the man's power he had over her as a woman; still, Marise told herself that she thanked Heaven to be rid of him. She must not appear too joyous, however, or Mothereen would be shocked. So realistic was the girl's air of sadness (helped by a prospect of heavy boredom), that

the dear woman attempted the task of cheering her up.

"Would ye like me to show ye an album of photos I have of himself as a boy and a growin' lad?" Mothereen wanted to know. "He was never much on bein' took, after he grew up. But I've kept all his letters he wrote me from the Front. They're great, and ye can have the run of 'em, me pet. But first we'll go through the album together, don't ye think?"

Marise said that she would be delighted. And she must have had a more angelic nature than she'd supposed, because the thought of the ordeal left her unruffled.

Mothereen brought the volume in question—bound in purple morocco—and a ribbon-tied bundle of letters to the girl's sitting-room. Then, with a beaming countenance, she settled herself on the sofa and opened the album on her lap. She had evidently no suspicion that she was being patronised good-naturedly by "Johnny's" wife. Indeed, she fully believed that the girl was impatiently waiting a treat.

"Come and sit down beside me, Mavourneen," she said. "That's right! Now we're cosy. See, this cute little photo at the beginnin' was Johnny when I had him first. Ye know the story, don't ye?"

"No-o," confessed Marise. She could easily have given an evasive answer; but suddenly she was conscious that she *wished* to know the story. "Maj—he—never told me."

"Never told ye!" echoed Mothereen. "Never told ye aught about the father he's so proud of, and all the rest? Why, if it had not been for that father of his, I don't suppose he'd have gone to the war like a shot, the way he did."

"Will you tell me—unless you think he'd rather you

didn't?" asked Marise, gazing at the badly-taken photograph of a handsome, fearless-eyed child of five or six, in funny little trousers.

"Sure, there's no reason *why* he should mind. The boy has nothing to blush for. It's all the contrary!" said Mothereen. "And I *will* tell ye. It's right ye should hear what the gossoon fought his way up from to where he stands now. Ye've heard, at the least, that the father was English?"

"I think I did hear him tell someone—not me—that his father was a Yorkshireman," Marise remembered.

"He was that, and a gentleman besides, an officer in the British Army. His name was the same as the child's—John Garth. It was an American girl he'd married, a girl from out West here. She went over to England as a kind of a nursery governess with a family of rich folks, and there was a row—a flare-up of some sort. The folks left her behind when they came home, and the girl got engaged to sing with a little concert party, tourin' the provinces. It was in Yorkshire Captain Garth saw her, and fell in love. He was always inventin' something or other, was my Johnny's dad: like father like son, and when the one child born to the pair of 'em was a toddler, the Captain had an accident with some explosive stuff he was workin' at. The poor young man's right arm was blown off, and his eyes were hurt. That meant he must leave the army, and as he wasn't wounded in the service of his country, not a red cent of pension did he get! The poor girl wife was expectin' a second child, but the shock she got by the accident brought on her trouble before its time, and she and the baby died together.

"It was nip and tuck that the Captain didn't die too. But he pulled through somehow, and there was the boy

to think of. When it turned out that Government would do nothin', the poor man had a notion to come to this side of the world—his dead wife's country. She'd always been tellin' him, it seems, that those inventions of his, that the British War Office turned up its nose at, might make his fortune in the States.

"Well, he took the little money he had left, and thought to try his luck. But he was pretty well done for, poor man, and a big storm there was, crossin', just about put the finishin' touch; for he broke his leg aboard ship."

"Were you on the ship?" Marise asked.

"Not me! 'Twas many a year since I was on board a ship," said Mothereen. "Me and my man—Pat was his name—we had our honeymoon in the steerage. 'Twas out to the West we came, near to where we are now, which is why me heart is in the West always. But troubles fell on Pat in business, and a friend of his invited him to join in a new scheme, back East in New York. The fellow'd been left a house there, off Third Avenue, and with Pat to help in the expense of a start, furnishin', advertisin' and the like, accordin' to him, they could coin money takin' boarders. It sounded all right on paper, and so it might have been in practice, maybe, with Pat to manage and me to cook, if half the boarders hadn't slipped off without settlin' their bills. But that's what they did, the spalpeens. And if troubles had been black out West, they was black and blue in N'York! This was the time when Captain Garth came limpin' in out of hospital, with his boy hangin' onto his hand. He'd seen our advertisement in a paper, offerin' cheap board. The man looked like death—and he didn't look like pay. But sure, me heart opened to the pair of 'em at first

sight! Ses I to meself, 'If I was to have a child, I'd want one the pattern o' *that.*'"

"What happened then?" Marise wanted to know, when Mothereen paused for her thoughts to rush back to the past.

"Just the things ye might suppose! We none of us had any luck. There was no more doin' for the inventions in the States than there'd been in England. The Captain left the child in my charge, and went to Washington. There he hung about the place till the last of his money was frittered away, and nothin' to show for it. But my, didn't that boy grow into me heart, those days when he was like me own? Four years old he was, and to look at him or hear him talk, you'd have said six! There came along a big wave of 'flu, the end of that hard winter, and my Pat and Captain Garth was both laid low with the sickness. Pat took it from the Captain, nursin' him—and within a week of each other they was dead. That's how me Johnny boy got to be me son."

"You were a saint to adopt him, when his father caused your husband's death," said Marise.

"*Saint,* is it? Wait till ye hear the rest of the story, and know what it was the boy did for me. Not much more than a baby he was, but with twice the understandin' of many a grown-up man I've met. He saw the way things were for me, with his wise little eyes, and he made up his mind to help when the time came.

"I had to give up the house, I couldn't hold on. I sold up my bits of things, and took one room for the two of us, Johnny and me. I got some sewin' to do, but 'twas in a neighbourhood of poor folk, and there wasn't enough comin' in to keep bread in our mouths. What do you think that baby did then, darlin'? I'm

sure *this* is the part of the story he'd *never* be tellin' ye!"

"I can't imagine," said Marise.

"How he saved a few cents I've never rightly known, for he was mum about it. What I think is, he must have begged till he had a half-dozen nickels or dimes. Then he bought newspapers, and sold 'em in the streets. From the first minute he was a success, and it's not hard to see why. He was in a different class from the poor dirty brats in the same business. And if ye'll believe it, me girl, there was times when the child kept the two of us on what he earned. From that day we never looked back. He put spirit into me, and the heart to work. Now, I'll turn over a page in the album, and show you our boy at the age of ten. What d'ye think of him?"

"He doesn't look like a seller of newspapers," said Marise.

"No more he wasn't, by then. He and I had gone into the molasses candy business. We made the candy ourselves; and if I do say it, there wasn't its equal in New York. Johnny would have the stuff wrapped up in pretty little packets of coloured paper tied with gold string, and I tell you, it went like smoke! At night, Johnny attended a school, and picked up knowledge as a chicken picks up corn.

"Now, here he is in the album again at fifteen. We had the Mooney Molasses Candies—three sorts—for sale in a lot of shops, and we'd a little flat of our own, and money in the bank. Isn't he a fine fellow to look at there? The makings of a man! 'Twas when he was fifteen that he began to study the note-books his father had left, and to turn his thoughts to inventions of his own. The first thing was an oyster-opener. The

second was a fastener to keep shoe-strings from untying. Then there was a big leap, and at eighteen he'd patented a toy pistol that fired six shots, and no danger in one of 'em! That was what began to bring *real* money in; and Johnny said, 'Mothereen' (he'd called me that name from the first), 'the next step is goin' to take us out West to the place that you love!' So it did! 'Twas that high-speed bullet of his which won him the notice of the War Office. It won him ten thousand dollars, too; and on the strength of it he brought me back to the town where Pat and I settled first, in the happy old days. But little did I dream even then of the destiny ahead of the boy! I was lovin' him too much, and rememberin' the child he'd been, to realise that by me side a real genius was growin' up. I might o' done, though, if I'd kept me eyes open, the way he studied and worked, worked and studied, readin' the classics and learnin' languages and mathematics the while he'd be faggin' out some new invention. But Johnny was never the boy to brag or talk about himself. He was always queer in spots, sort of broodin', you'd almost say sulky, unless you knew him, and a temper, too; though never with me. Then came his discovery of how to make motor spirit out of coke. That finished buildin' this house we're in, and bought his land at Grand Canyon. I mean it did all that in the first few months. Soon afterwards the dollars poured on us by thousands—yes, tens of thousands! You sure heard of the trench motor-tool for diggin', I know, because 'twas in all the English papers after the war had broken out, and Johnny was at the Front. There was all that about his Victoria Cross at the same time, or was it a bit before? You can tell me, I guess?"

"It must have been before. I never knew why he was decorated," Marise said.

"He wouldn't tell you when ye asked?" cried Mothereen, as certain as she was of life that the girl *had* asked—yes, begged and prayed!

"He never did tell."

"Well, ye shall read the newspaper paragraphs yerself—American papers, mind ye!—for he never sent me the English ones, and I got what I got through his friends. I've columns cut out. And with them there's the praise of the trench machine, and the new kind of steel—Radium steel, he calls it—that they say will make him a millionaire in a year or two."

"A millionaire!" echoed Marise. "I thought he was poor!"

"Poor! Ye thought that—yet ye *married* him—you, who could get anyone ye liked, from Princes of the Blood down to Cotton Kings! You *darlin'!* Well, ye'll have yer reward. The boy is not poor. He's rich—what *anybody* would call rich."

"Then why——" Marise burst out, and stopped herself. If she hadn't bitten back the words, they would have tumbled out: "*Why* did he marry me?"

She felt very small in spirit and mean of soul compared with humble Mothereen, whose faith and loyalty had bridged the dark years with gold.

Why had a man brought up by Mothereen wanted to play the dummy hand in this ridiculous game of marriage?

CHAPTER XXXII

THE BEREAVED ONE

WHEN his ship docked, two telegrams were handed to Lord Severance. The first which he opened was from Mrs. Sorel, and he glanced through it eagerly.

"Everything going as well as could be expected, but your return and final completion of arrangement eagerly awaited.—Mary S."

This was not quite as reassuring, somehow, as the sender intended it to be. There seemed to be a hidden meaning behind the words, which twanged the wrong chords of Severance's emotions. Hastily he tore open the second envelope, hoping to find a message from Marise herself. But the signature was "Constantine Ionides." Then Severance read with horrified, incredulous eyes, "Œnone died suddenly last night of heart failure."

For a moment Tony did not understand all that the news would mean for him. Œnone dead! Well, he was free, at least! The hateful farce would not have to be gone through. He could sail for New York again in a few days.

But a shock of realisation broke the thought. Not to marry Œnone meant that he would not get his uncle's promised wedding gift. A fortune was lost!

The blow was a staggering one. He felt its full

force, as if he had abruptly turned to face a gale from the east.

Wasn't it just his luck? Didn't everything always go like that for him in life? Almost to lay his hand on the things he wanted, to see them slip away from under his fingers!

The journey to London was interminable. He suffered so much during the miserable hours that it seemed as if he must have the consolation of some reward at the end—must learn that Œnone hadn't died after all, or that, better still, Uncle Constantine intended in any case to give him the money which should have been his.

But there was no brightening of the gloom for him. In fact, things were rather worse at the end of the journey, if possible, than he had expected. Uncle Constantine's heart was not softened by sorrow. On the contrary, he turned upon Severance in a rage and blamed him for Œnone's death.

The girl had faded visibly after her cousin left England. She knew one or two people who thought it for her good to be told that Tony's "mission" was to follow Marise Sorel. Œnone had subscribed for several American papers, in order to read of Lord Severance's doings on the other side. One was a weekly gossip rag, and she had been turning over a copy when she died. In fact, the thing was found in her hand, open at a page where Severance's name was coupled in a sneering way with that of Marise Sorel. The actress was said to have jilted him for a Major Garth, V.C., of his own regiment, and the rumour was reported that out of pique Severance would now marry his rich Greek cousin in London.

"It was enough to kill her—and it did!" said Ionides. "Damn you, Severance! I wish to Heaven you were

dead instead of my poor girl who loved you. And I wish to hell I could upset her will in your favour. I can't do that. But not a shilling of *my* money will you ever get."

So Œnone had left him her own private fortune, as she had told him she meant to do if she died! That was something—probably the equivalent of the pledged million dollars—not allowing for the vile exchange. But of what use was *one* million dollars to him, in his present plight? The least he could do with was double that sum.

To carry out the bargain with Garth and free Marise he would have to hand over a cool million. But how was he going to pay even his most pressing debts and live—much less *marry*—if he cleaned himself out of his whole inheritance at one stroke?

On the other hand, if he kept the million doubtless coming to him by Œnone's will, he would have nothing to offer Garth. The whole plan would be a colossal failure: worse than a failure—a catastrophe. Garth would stick to Marise from motives of spite, if nothing worse. The girl's life would be ruined, and she would be lost to him unless he killed Garth, or unless the man laid himself open to divorce proceedings—which was the very thing he would be careful not to do—unless well paid.

Of course, a woman could divorce a man for incompatibility of temper and things of that sort in one or two states out West, in America, Severance had vaguely heard. But a hocus pocus affair of that sort wouldn't be considered legal in England, and Marise could never, in such circumstances, become the Countess of Severance, even if they had money to marry on—which they wouldn't have!

Severance had not known or guessed how the girl had said to herself that, if there were a question of jilting, *she* wished to be the jilter, not the jilted. Had he known, he would have felt even more bitter against Fate. As it was, he pitied Marise, although the disasters which had fallen on them both came through her impulsiveness. If only she hadn't rushed off and married John Garth on an hour's notice, that beastly paragraph would never have been printed, and Œnone would still be alive. It had been foolish, rash, passionately mistaken. Severance felt hotly. But there was little resentment in his pain. He blamed himself almost, if not quite, as much as Marise, and all that was Greek in him accepted, while it writhed at, the fatality.

When Œnone's funeral was over and the contents of her will known, the legacy reached the amount promised. But—the exchange, the awful exchange between England and America! And the equally appalling death duties! Even if Severance decided to plunge, and offer *all* to Garth, the sum would fall far short of a million dollars. Besides, he couldn't offer all, or nearly all. He was dunned on every side.

There were moments—moments when he was most Greek—when Tony said to himself that he would have to leave Marise to her fate. She had made her bed. She must lie on it. He would stay in England, pay his debts, and be extremely comfortable on what was left over out of Œnone's gift. But there were other moments, burning moments, fanned to molten fire by Mrs. Sorel's letters and telegrams. He *couldn't* give up Marise! Something must be done. And at last, through the red mists he saw a way to bluff himself out of the depths.

"Coming back at once," he cabled Mary Sorel at Bell

Towers, and started the same day (the fourteenth day after Œnone's funeral) in a cabin given up at the eleventh hour by its purchaser.

The legacy was not yet in his hands, nor would it be for months to come, but Severance had been able to borrow a substantial sum on the certainty of his prospects. The voyage was stormy, and not being a good sailor, he arrived in New York a wreck. He had courage enough, however, to start at once for Los Angeles, where he meant to see his friend and well-wisher, Mrs. Sorel. With her counsel he would consolidate his plans, and start the campaign against Garth.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE VISITORS' BOOK

"OH, Tony, what a downfall of our castle in the air!" were Mary's first words, as she held out her hands to Severance. "This beautiful Bell Towers, where we hoped we should be so happy—you and Marise and I—wasted—wasted! Our dream broken! The best prospect for my poor child now is, that she can go back to the stage and begin again where she left off."

Severance had come to her for comfort, but found he had to give instead of get it.

"Oh, I say! Things aren't as bad as all that!" he protested. "Tell me exactly how matters are, so far as you know, with Marise. Then I'll tell you how they are with me. You must remember, I'm not without resources—or ideas."

They were standing together on a rose-hung loggia, looking over a fountain terrace where oranges shone in the sun and a hundred flowers poured forth perfume like a hymn of praise. As Mary Sorel had said, the place was a perfect setting for romance. But all hope wasn't over yet!

Tea was brought to the loggia; and when the maid had gone, Mary began to tell Severance—not only the news he wanted to hear, but, alas! much news that made sorry hearing indeed.

"Céline writes me, as often as Marise does," Mrs.

Sorel explained, a little shamefacedly. "I arranged that she should do so. Marise is *odd* in some ways, you know. Not secretive exactly. No. But she has sudden, unexpected sort of reserves. And I wanted an unbiased account of affairs, from—well, from more than one point of view. They've left Albuquerque, near where the adopted mother lives, and gone to the place I wrote you about—the Grand Canyon. At least, Garth's property isn't far from the Canyon. You can see it from the windows. 'Vision House,' he calls the place; but I think it's more because getting the land was the fulfilment of some old dream than because of the view. Marise says that's wonderful, though—the view, I mean."

"You can't expect me to care about the view from Garth's damned house, where he keeps Marise a prisoner!" exploded Severance.

"No, dear boy—forgive me! I was wandering from the peint, thinking of her letters. *They* wander, too. She tells me all kinds of things about the place. She says it's amazing. She talks more of everything else than herself."

"What does she say about Garth?"

"Not more than she can help. But—oh, *one* thing! Tony, she tells me he's rich—very rich."

"Rot! He wants her to believe that."

"No. Someone else told her, not he. And the house, though it's simple, is the house of a rich man, she says. I should have been there by this time, if you hadn't wired me you were coming here to get my advice before—before deciding what to do next. And—besides, I was a *little* delayed by the visit of a *charming* Comtesse de Sorel who came to Los Angeles, and thought she might be distantly related to poor dear

Louis. We fagged up the family tree together. It appears that Louis just missed being a comte himself, by descent, because of—ah—a family accident: a marriage that didn't take place. Think of the difference to us if——"

"I'm thinking of the difference to me because of a marriage that did take place!" Severance cut her short. "I shall start for the Grand Canyon at once. I suppose there's an hotel there."

"Marise says there's a *dream* of an hotel, close to the abyss, or whatever you call it. The name is El Tovar, after some old Spanish general who seems to have been even more of a brute than Garth. You'll go there—naturally. Yet I thought from what you said that all was over—that you couldn't *pay* Garth, and——"

"I'll do something! You don't suppose I'm going to stand quietly by and leave him in possession, do you?"

"Well, he's not exactly in *possession.* To put it like that is to exaggerate——"

"He's got the legal power of a husband over Marise, and, one way or another, he'll have to be kicked out!"

"That, at least, will be something to the good—if you succeed, dear boy. But this terrible disappointment over the money . . . What *do* you think of doing?"

Severance put into words what he thought of doing. Mums listened earnestly, weighing each pro and con as he talked. For a wonder, she didn't interrupt. It was only when he had finished and awaited an opinion that she spoke.

"Very good! Very good indeed!" she praised him. "It seems to me that you've analysed the man's character, and formed your plan on the analysis. Marise—ah, well, *she's* more complicated than he is, of course!

But I think this idea of yours will appeal to her romantic side. Like all girls, she *is* romantic."

"Everything depends upon how she feels towards me," said Severance. "She did care a little—once. You don't think that what I—what's happened has changed her?"

"I don't see why it should have done," answered Mary. "After all, she consented."

"I'm afraid your influence was for something in that!"

"Naturally a mother has influence. But Marise's mind is her own. She's very individual. Besides, the time is so short since then."

Yes, Mums was right there! The time was short—very short. Only a few weeks had passed since the day when Marise had been persuaded to accept the first Great Plan, though it felt more like several years. She couldn't have changed—unless association with a man like Garth had made her value Severance more than ever.

The one amendment Mary had to make was that she should travel with Tony, and be on the spot to help in the carrying out of this new, second plan. But her suggestion was received with an ill grace. "I want to do it all on my own," he objected. "If Marise is romantic, as you say she is, it would spoil the whole show to have her mother in the background. No, what's got to be done I want to do myself. You must wait here. I'll bring her to you when I can, if things turn out the way I expect. Anyhow, you trust her to me, don't you?"

"Of course, dear Tony," Mums assured him. Her voice didn't sound quite sincere, but then, it seldom did, unless she was in a temper. And after all, Sever-

ance didn't care a hang whether she trusted him or not, so long as she did not interfere. The mother of Marise bored him with her pretensions and affectations, though she was useful at times; and in the future—that future which he hoped to share with Marise—he didn't intend to see a great deal of Mrs. Sorel.

Bell Towers was as beautiful as it had been described, and it was his own for the next few months. But weary as he was, Severance left the place that night, taking a stateroom in the train for Williams—"Williams" being the prosaically-named junction for perhaps the most romantic place in the world, the Grand Canyon.

. . . . . .

Getting out at the small station Severance saw no Canyon at first. It couldn't be so huge or wonderful as people said, he thought, and anyhow, he didn't care for scenery—especially now. There was a pine wood, and ascending out of it for a short distance he came to the hotel—a glorified loghouse, it was—such a loghouse as the Geni of the Lamp might have created for Aladdin by request. It was very big and very beautiful. Even Severance, tired and out of temper, couldn't help admitting its charm. Then, on the plateau of the hotel, above the wood, he found himself gazing straight down into the canyon, and far across a gulf of gold and rose.

The man was amazed, almost stunned, for a moment. Constitutionally he dreaded great heights and depths, and though the place was stupendously magnificent, the moment his eyes saw its majesty Severance longed to escape from it. With relief, he turned his back upon the flaming rocks and sapphire depths, and almost ran into the hotel.

There was a vast, low-ceilinged hall, with just the right sort of furniture, and an odd invention—a cross between hammocks and hanging sofas—suspended here and there by chains from the roof. In these things girls sat; and there were several extremely handsome young men lounging about, dressed like cowboys. Severance caught snatches of conversation about ponies, and the "long trail" and the "short trail." Everyone had either just made the descent into the canyon, or intended to make it; but Severance had no wish for the adventure which brought most people to this abode of wonders.

The hotel, it appeared, was nearly full, but there were two or three rooms free for that night, and Tony engaged one. He then inquired the way and the distance to "Vision House."

"Oh, Major Garth's!" exclaimed the hotel clerk. "It's about a mile or a mile and a half from here. It's on the edge of the pine forest—has just a group of big trees between it and the canyon—not enough to hide the view, though. Some think the trees improve it—make a sort of frame. You can walk, easily. But I saw Major Garth in the hotel half an hour ago, with a friend who's convalescing here after being ill. I'm sure he's not gone yet. I can send and see if he——"

"Please don't do that!" Severance broke in. "I am—a relative of Mrs. Garth, and I have a message to deliver from her mother. There's no need to disturb Major Garth if he's with a friend."

Severance had intended to bathe, change into fresh clothes, and have a long, cool drink—the drink of his life—before starting out to call at Vision House. He could thus have been at his best, and have felt sure

of doing himself justice in any ordeal he might be destined to go through. But with the certain knowledge that Garth was out of the way—perhaps only for a short time—it would have been tempting Providence to delay for one unnecessary second.

He inquired just how to go, and vetoed the suggestion that he should first look at his room.

"If you'll register, I'll ring for a chap to show you where you start from," said the clerk, pushing a big book forward and handing the guest a pen.

"Earl of Severance," Tony wrote, expecting to see the man look impressed, but no such emotion was visible. Instead, he turned back a few pages to show the signature of an Indian rajah and a Scottish duke. A mere earl looked small fry compared with them!

On the same page with the duke, Severance happened to catch sight of a name which was vaguely familiar to him, and he kept the book open to refresh his memory.

"Miss Zélie Marks," he repeated to himself. "Now where have I heard . . ."

Then, suddenly, he knew.

Zélie Marks's face rose before his mind, and he recalled where he had seen it last—recalled also a look he had caught in a pair of handsome eyes fixed upon Garth the day of the first visit.

Mrs. Sorel had tried to send the two off together, and Severance had said to himself, "That couple know each other pretty well. The girl's in love with the fellow!"

So she was out West, at this hotel, close to Garth's house! Why? What did it mean? It must mean *something*. . . . Did Marise know? . . . Had Miss Marks been brought here purposely to give the wished-

for—the arranged-for—excuse for a divorce? Or was the reason for her presence more subtle and more complicated?

Severance felt excited, as if he had picked up something of unexpected value.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE TERRACE

MARISE stood on the high terrace which looked towards the rose-and-gold gulf of the Canyon. Gazing out, between the dark slim trunks of pines, she saw the sunlight moving slowly from rock to rock. "It's like stray sheep of the golden fleece," she thought, "being herded by an invisible shepherd to join the flock."

Yes, the moving gleams were all massed together now. But they were travelling on. Suddenly they had ceased to be a flock of sheep. They were shining bricks, built into a citadel.

"In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a stately palace dome decree," Marise quoted to herself.

How astonishing that so marvellous a place had existed for thousands upon thousands of years, and she had hardly heard of it, until John Garth had brought her to this house of his!

"Vision House" was the right name for it. Garth hadn't meant it like that—or if he had, he'd not told her so!—but one *had* visions here. One couldn't think little ordinary, foolish thoughts. Life seemed to be upon its highest plane, and whether one wished to do so or not, one had to try and reach that plane. One wanted to be at one's best, to be "in the picture"—and the best must be very good. It must even be noble.

Whoever had designed Vision House and chosen its furnishings had felt that. There were great windows

bowed out in generous eagerness towards the Canyon. There were wide loggias, upheld by clear-cut, pale stone pillars. In the rooms were no brilliant colours to jar with the rainbow glory just beyond the delicate green veil of pines. The curtains of grey or cream fell in soft, straight lines that framed a glowing picture—rocks of every fantastic form and flaming colour, under the blue of heaven: rocks like castles carved of coral and studded with lapis lazuli: statue rocks of transparent amethyst, or emerald, glittering where the sun touched them or fading to the smoky blue of star-sapphires as the shadows crept up from the bottom of the vast bowl.

There was an organ in one of the rooms. Garth had thought that the finest piano in the world would be too tinkling a thing so near the thrilling silence of the Canyon. He could play the great instrument himself. She wouldn't have believed it, if she had not heard the music as she walked alone on the terrace by moonlight, and had gone to peep in at the long, open window. *How* he could play!—though he said casually, when she asked him, "Oh, I wanted to do it, so I taught myself. I hear things in my head. I like to make them come out." A queer fellow!

In the library there were only books which Garth thought "worthy of the Canyon." But in her room there were a few French novels. It was the one place in the house, too, where there were pretty, frivolous decorations such as a Parisian beauty of the seventeenth, or an American of the twentieth, century would love. *That* was what he thought of her! *She* would crave such surroundings at the Grand Canyon, as well as in New York or London! She, and no one else whom he had ever planned to bring here!

When Marise thought of that room, and the difference between it and all the others, she felt—not angry, for one *couldn't* feel angry for small reasons, close to the greatness of the Canyon,—no, not angry, but pained, and—wistful.

She was wistful because she could not help seeing that the things Garth must hastily have ordered for her pleasure were actually suited to her type, her personality, and she had growing pains of the spirit which made her long to climb high and higher, out of herself. Somehow that room seemed to represent herself: soft and vaguely sweet; pretty, perfumed, charming, fantastic and—forgetable. How should Garth have known that she would suddenly become a different self, irradiated by the sublime glory of this place? Why, even she hadn't known it, until she had begun to feel the change! And it had started at sight of the difference between those other, nobly simple rooms, which somehow matched the Canyon, and hers which childishly laughed in its face.

Or—had Garth expected her to change, under the influence, which was like the influence of all the gods, and *wanted* her to feel the difference as she was feeling it now?

As she asked herself this question a pretty, half-breed Mexican maid flitted out upon the terrace and announced "Ze Earl of Sev'rance."

Marise started. She need not have been surprised. She ought to have known (having heard of Œnone's death) that any day might bring Tony to her. But the truth was that, for the time—quite a long time—she had forgotten all about him.

He didn't belong to the Grand Canyon! But sud-

denly she felt a desire to see what he would be like, confronting it.

"Show Lord Severance out here," she directed the maid. And then, between the moment when the girl turned her back, and the moment when Tony stepped through an open window-door of the drawing-room, Marise had to realise that she faced a crisis—had to prepare for it.

The red-gold light that always came from the Canyon like flame made Severance seem to have deep mauve rings under his eyes, an appearance which gave him a dissipated look. She began by not thinking him as deadly handsome as she had always thought him in London and sometimes in New York. No, certainly he didn't go well with Canyons and things like that! But, of course, he was tired. He had travelled fast, and a very long way—to meet *her*. She must remember this in his favour.

He didn't glance through the trees at the dazzling glory. He'd had enough and too much of the old Canyon! He looked straight at Marise. And he walked straight to her, seizing both her hands, which resisted a little, then thought better of it and welcomed him.

"Poor Tony!" she breathed.

"Not 'poor Tony,' now I see you again," he said. "Marise, you're more beautiful than ever. You're the most beautiful thing on this globe. Where can we go, where a lot of huge windows won't be glaring at us like bulging eyes?"

"There's nobody to glare through them," answered Marise. "My—*he*—isn't at home."

"I know," said Severance. "That's why I hurried to you without stopping even to bathe and change. I

wanted a talk with you before thrashing things out with Garth. 'Wanted'? That isn't the word! I thirsted, I burned for it. He's not in the house, but servants are. Marise, I've travelled six thousand miles, hardly resting—just for this moment—and others to follow—better moments. Give me one of the better ones now. I deserve a reward. And I can't take it here on this beastly terrace."

Marise suddenly realised that nothing in the world would move her from the terrace. She was glad of the window-eyes. They were her protectors against—against—the man she had loved.

The words spoke themselves in her head. She heard them. She was surprised at them. *Had* loved! Didn't she love Tony Severance now? If not, why had she done all that she had done—so many wild, reckless things? It seemed that she was asking the question not of herself, but of the Canyon. The Canyon was like God. In the glittering, flaming, blue-shadowed depths of it was knowledge of Everything.

"I think we must stay here," she said. "There is no other place where we can very well go. Would you—like to sit down on that seat by the wall?"

"What I would like is to kneel at your feet with my arms round your waist and my head on your breast—your dear, divine breast," answered Severance.

"Well—you can't!" she panted. "Tony, be sensible!" She sat down hastily, and Severance dropped beside her on the velvet-cushioned stone seat. He sat very close to the girl, and she edged slightly away.

As she did so, he followed until she was pressed into the corner of the bench. He laid his arm along the back of the seat, and pressed her thinly-covered shoulder.

"Please don't!" she whispered.

Severance laughed out—a bitter laugh. "This is the way you greet me after all I've gone through to get to you—and to get you!" he said. "You know, I *am* going to get you."

Marise did not answer. She knew nothing of the kind. All she knew was, quite suddenly, that there was no longer any doubt in her mind on one subject. She did *not* love Tony! She was sorry for him, and sorry for herself, and sorry for everything in the world. But she did not love him. She disliked having him touch her.

"You *do* know it, don't you?" he insisted.

"No, I don't," she stammered. "There—there's nothing to know."

"Are you acting a part with me?" Severance flung at her. "Or what has come over you, Marise? One would think you in reality the virtuous married woman, keeping the *tertium quid* at arm's length——"

"Well, I *am* a married woman. And—and I'm not *un*virtuous!" she defied him, through her heart-beats. "Things have changed, Tony——"

"Why—because I've got a million dollars less than you expected me to have?"

The girl sprang to her feet, tingling and trembling. Severance jumped up also, and belted her slim waist with his hot hands. He thought that this was the way to regain her—that by grasping her body he might seize her elusive spirit. It was all that Marise could do not to scream, "Help! Help!" like an early-Victorian heroine. She bit back the cry of primitive womanhood, but to her intense surprise, and even horror, she found herself landing a rousing box on Tony's ear.

"You vixen!" he blurted.

"Cad!" she retorted.

With that, his hands dropped from her waist. His face had been pale with fatigue. Now it was paler with pain. "You don't—mean that, Marise?" he stammered.

And, of course, she didn't. Things had happened in the past which had encouraged him to this. He had thought she loved him. She was to blame as much as he was—more, perhaps—the Canyon would say.

"I'm sorry I boxed your ear, Tony," she apologised. "But—but—if you go on like this, I'm awfully afraid I shall lose my head and box it again."

"I don't understand you," he said, more quietly.

"I don't understand myself," she confessed.

"Then"—and fire from the Canyon lit Severance's Greek eyes—"it's my plan to make you understand. You love me. You *daren't* go back from it all, after what's passed. I love you, and you belong to me."

"Good afternoon, Severance," said Garth at the window. "I heard you'd arrived."

CHAPTER XXXV

STRAIGHT TALK

IF Garth had appeared two minutes earlier, he need have suffered no uncertainty about Marise. But unfortunately she was not in these days the romantic heroine of a stage play. Characters did not come on or go off at just the right instant to work up her scenes in life. Therefore this unrehearsed effect ended with an anti-climax. Whether Severance were cast for hero or villain remained doubtful: and whether she had acted the noble wife or the weak lover was left vague: or at least, it was vague to the mind of Garth. He had no idea what Marise had done. He was sure only that Severance had done as much as she would let him do. By and by he expected to learn a great deal more: through the process of deduction.

"Good gracious, if I *had* called out, he would have heard me!" thought Marise; and was thankful that she hadn't. To yell for John Garth to rescue her from Tony Severance! That would have been too inane, too ridiculous. Nevertheless, a picture flashed vividly across her brain: Garth as he had looked that night at Mothereen's house when hearing her shriek he had bounded to her bedside from behind the screen. His collar had been off, his strong throat bare, his hair rumpled. It had occurred to Marise as she peeped from between her lashes that he'd make a fine model for a young Samson, newly sheared by Delilah.

The man's quiet voice and his drawled "Good after-

noon, Severance," frightened her a little. She had seen him angry, but never violent. She felt convinced, somehow, that the angrier he was, the more quiet he would be—deadly quiet. Just why she felt that, she couldn't have explained, for she did not know him well—indeed, she knew him hardly at all. Yet she *was* sure—very sure. And she was sure also that his "good afternoon" didn't express Garth's real emotion at sight of Severance with her on the terrace of Vision House.

"What had I better do?" she wondered. "Go—or stay?"

She decided to stay, and keep peace between the two men if need be. Besides, she *must* hear what they would say to each other!

Severance had no conventional answer for Garth's "Good afternoon." He stood silent, staring and frowning, fingering his small black moustache.

"To what do we owe the pleasure of this visit?" asked his host.

Severance had never been able to forget the scene between himself and Garth at the latter's hotel in New York. He was at heart more Greek than British; and the days are long past since Greeks were aggressive fighters. He shrank from any repetition of his experience at the Belmore, and had come to Vision House meaning not to rouse Garth to violent issues. That cool question was too much, however, for his prudence. Anyhow, even Garth wouldn't be brute enough to attack him before Marise!

"I have come to bring Miss Sorel a message from her mother, who wants her at Los Angeles," he said sharply.

"That might do if she were Miss Sorel," returned Garth. "But she isn't."

"She is professionally," said Severance.

"She's ceased to be a professional."

"Temporarily."

"Oh! Your point is that she's the temporary wife of a temporary gentleman, and that as such her time with the T.G. is up. Is that it?"

"Precisely."

"I see. You've come to wind up the arrangement?"

"I have. You must have been expecting me."

"I didn't let my mind dwell on you. How are you going to pay me my million—in banknotes, bonds or a cheque? Because I may as well inform you, I shall refuse to accept a cheque."

"I don't mean to offer you one."

"Very well. Have you got the million on you?"

"I have not! I haven't got it anywhere—that is, all of it. I shall pay you by instalments."

"I can't agree to accept the money like that."

"You'll have to!" exploded Severance. "There's nothing else you can do."

"You think so? We shall see. But it occurs to me that one instalment deserves another. You pay me by instalments: I allow my wife to go to her mother by instalments. Some of her trunks can go first."

"For God's sake don't joke about this thing!" broke out Severance. "It's too coarse—even for you."

"Strikes me that it would be coarser to take it seriously," said Garth. "And there's no need of doing that any more."

"What do you mean?" the other asked sharply.

"As I pointed out before, the 'bargain's' smashed to bits."

"Nothing of the sort!" Severance flung at him. "There wasn't a word spoken about handing you the whole million in a bunch."

"There was something said about handing it over in advance. It wasn't handed over."

"That was Marise's fault, not mine. She rushed on the marriage out of childish pique against me, never stopping to dream of the consequences."

"Which, however, haven't been very disastrous for her," said Garth. "Have they, Marise?"

"No-o," she murmured. "But oh, please, both of you —don't lose your heads!"

"Mine's on my shoulders," returned Garth calmly. "And I see an excrescence of some sort protruding from Severance's. You need have no fear for either of us. Still, if you prefer to wait indoors, we can get on without you for awhile."

"No, I'd rather stop where I am," Marise chose.

"To go back then," said Garth; "the fault, if it was a fault, anyhow wasn't mine. I obeyed the lady's commands and married her without haggling for money down. As there was no 'bargain' to stick to, I stuck to my post, the post of dummy husband, to oblige her, not for any mercenary reason. I shall go on sticking to it, if not to please her, or myself, just because I've got into the habit. I can't break that even for Mrs. Sorel; certainly not for you."

"I'm not talking of myself now," barked Severance. "I'm talking of Marise. She wants to be free. Surely you won't hold her against her will."

"Surely she can speak for herself!" said Garth.

Marise did not speak. Her senses began to whirl. She did not know what was to become of her. She couldn't tell what she wished would become of her! She felt as if a wave had swept over her head. She was drowning.

"No!" snapped Garth, when she remained silent,

looking at neither, but gazing anxiously out towards the Canyon. "No, I agreed to play the dummy hand during your absence for the sum of a million dollars. I haven't got the million. But even if I had got it, I should have demanded a second million to clear out. There was nothing specified on that score in New York."

"It was taken for granted, of course!" said Severance. "There was no other meaning possible. We trusted to your honour."

"We?"

"Miss Sorel and I—and her mother."

"That's news to me. Perhaps I shall appreciate it as a compliment when I'm old—ninety or so. I don't now. I simply don't believe it."

"You think we lie?"

"First person singular, please! Marise hasn't spoken."

"Damn you!" broke out Severance, at the end of his tether, and for once reckless of consequences. "You refuse to let her go—you refuse equally to leave her."

"That's so," said Garth, with an exaggerated nasal twang which made Severance want to kill him for his insolence. He started forward, itching to strike; but something he saw in Garth's eyes brought him to a standstill. That confounded tooth episode was always "throwing itself up at him," so to speak! Fortunately, however, he remembered something at that instant—a weapon which he had almost overlooked, though it was within his grasp. He calmed himself with a kind of mental and physical stiffening.

"If you don't intend to carry out your agreement—I insist, *your agreement*—! why have you brought that secretary girl, Miss Marks, all the way from New York to El Tovar Hotel?" he hurled at Garth. "When I

heard she was there and that you were constantly riding over from your place to see her, I supposed it was done on purpose to give Marise an easy chance to get her divorce. As it is——"

"As it is," Garth cut him short, "the affair is not your business."

"It's Marise's business, if it *doesn't* mean what I thought."

"Then let her attend to it. She's quite capable of doing that," said Garth. "And now, unless you can produce a million dollars at sight, or still better, two million, don't you think you'd be wise to blow back to your hotel? It'll soon be too dark to walk."

Severance turned furiously to the pale girl. "Marise—can you stand by and see me ordered away like this?"

She looked at him with a strange look which he could not read at all. "This is his house, Tony," she answered, in an odd, dull voice. "Not mine."

"I think you'd best go, for your own sake," said Garth. "But come back, of course, when you've got the money. If we're here then, we'll be glad to see you."

Severance turned without another word, even to Marise, and walked away as he had come, passing through the drawing-room. Garth started to follow, but Marise ran to him and stopped him with a small, ice-cold hand on his arm. "Why are you going after Lord Severance?" she whispered, her lips dry.

"Only to see that he doesn't lose himself somewhere in the house and hide under a table or sofa," Garth explained.

Her hand dropped. She let him go.

There was no fear of anything melodramatic, she saw. Yet she was not relieved. She felt as if she

had some black, hollow, worn-out thing in her breast instead of a heart. It was heavy and useless, and hardly beat.

"That horrid girl!" she said half aloud when Garth had gone. "I always knew, really, she would be here. I believe he *did* give her the jewels, and Mothereen wangled them away from her somehow. He's pretending to follow Tony, and see him out. But he doesn't mean to come back here to me."

As she thought this, Garth came back.

CHAPTER XXXVI

STUMBLING IN THE DARK

AFTER all, Severance had hardly expected a more brilliant result from his bluff. The one real failure was in losing his temper, which, when discussing his plan with Mums, he'd meant to preserve like a jewel of price.

Only the short preliminary round had been played. The game proper was all before him. He'd tested Marise to begin with. She had not been completely satisfying. That is, she hadn't thrown herself into his arms and sighed, "Take me away, darling Tony!" which would have been the ideal thing. But on the other hand, she hadn't very actively repelled him. If Garth had not appeared on the scene like a stage demon, all might have been different. The fellow was a bully, and had cowed the girl. Heaven knew to what means he had resorted in these last weeks to break her high spirit. But of course there was no doubt that she wanted to free herself, and the best service Severance could give his dear lady-love was to take her (ostensibly) against her will.

That brought him back mentally to the plan he had explained to Mary Sorel at Bell Towers—the plan she had approved. He must carry it out at once. And Zélie Marks's presence at the hotel might help, he began dimly to see now.

By the time he had reached El Tovar he saw with more clearness. At the hotel desk he scribbled on one

of his visiting cards, "Please grant me a short interview. I come to you from Mrs. John Garth." This card he slipped into an envelope and closed down the flap. Then he addressed it, and requested the clerk, "Kindly have this sent up immediately to Miss Marks."

While he awaited an answer, or the arrival of Zélie, Severance debated whether or no to wire Mary Sorel.

She had suggested his doing so, to prevent any danger of scandal in the working out of the plan. But in his heart Tony had no longer the holy terror of that bogey which had chilled him while Œnone was alive.

Then, the least whisper of gossip connecting him with Miss Sorel, or even Mrs. Garth, might have ruined the prospect of marriage with his cousin: and that would have been, indirectly, as harmful to Marise as himself. Now, however, when there was nothing further to be gained or lost for either of them from Constantine Ionides, Severance need think only of himself and Marise; and he thought of himself first.

His intention was to take Marise away from Garth, who had no right to the girl and was keeping her against her true wish. If necessary, Severance would take her by force, for her own good, because then the thing would be done and over with: there would be no going back. But—anyhow—he would take her!

Mums had urged him to wire, if his first attempt failed, and Garth refused to see reason as presented to him with mild bluff. She wanted to fly to the Grand Canyon and be on the spot—ready for emergencies—to stand by her daughter. But Severance wasn't sure even now, as things had turned out, whether he would be wise in furthering this wish.

It was natural, of course. But just as scandal would have been fatal before, it might be useful in the present

situation. If her "Mums" were close at hand, Marise might in the first confusion of her mind seek refuge under the maternal wing, from the man she loved. If she did anything futile like that, it would give Garth time to act: whereas, if Marise had no refuge but her lover—oh, distinctly it would be tempting Providence to telegraph to Mums!

. . . . . .

"Well?" said Garth, when Marise stood statuelike in the blue dusk.

"I don't think it *is* very well," she answered slowly.

"I warned you fairly that I'd not stand out of Severance's way," Garth reminded her, his face so grey and grim in the twilight that the girl remembered how she had thought it looked carved from rock.

"Yet only a few minutes ago you offered to leave me, for a bribe of a second million."

"There can't be a 'second' million till there's been a first."

"The principle is the same."

"There's where you're mistaken. I think now the time has come for you to understand. But I had a sneaking idea that perhaps you did understand, already. You have a sense of humour—a strong one, for a woman."

"Has a sense of humour anything to do with—this affair?"

"Yes. A grim one. But if you don't see it——"

"Sometimes for a minute I've wondered if I did see—something."

"What did you think you saw?"

"I—hardly care to put it into words."

"All right. I'll do it for you. But if I do, you must answer honestly."

"I will—if I answer at all."

"Very well, I'll risk your answering. You wondered pretty often and by flashes if the question of money ever had anything to do with my accepting the damnable and disgusting offer Severance made to me. Was that it?"

"Ye-es. Though what else could it be, when you showed in every way that your love—if it was love—had turned to—to actual *hate,* before you married me?"

"Oh, not so bad as that!" Garth protested, something like a queer, suppressed laugh shaking his voice.

"Dislike, then."

"That sounds as if I hadn't treated you decently."

"No, for you *have.* You've been very decent indeed—except that you've forced me to do lots of things I haven't wanted to do, like living in that suite at the Plaza and—and coming out here, and all that."

"Wasn't it necessary, as you were so anxious to avoid scandal?"

"There might have been other ways."

"I didn't see them. Anyhow, it's done now. It can't be undone. And as things were, I've tried to treat you as you want to be treated, all through. As to the money, I will defend myself there, since it seems that you have seen to the bottom of the well—where truth lies!—only in those short flashes. If Severance had ever tried to hand me a million dollars or any other sum for what I've done, I'd have thrown it in his face, and knocked the face in after it. That's what I meant from the first. So now you know."

"But—if you'd stopped wanting me? Why—why? You said yourself I didn't seem to be a judge of how much it took to kill love."

"Yes, I said that."

"And you said other things. You said a million was always useful to anyone——"

"There I banked again on your sense of humour. Or perhaps a little on your judgment of character."

"I must confess I've tried to judge yours!" Marise exclaimed, almost in spite of herself. "But I can't—I'm always stumbling against things—in the dark."

"Well, there's plenty of 'dark'! I admit that," said Garth. "Many people would say that of me. Perhaps the only one who wouldn't is little Mothereen, and we can't count her, can we? There are all sorts of horrid possibilities in the dark, where a character's concerned. My motive, though *not* mercenary, might have been revenge punishment!"

"That's often seemed to me the most likely!" cried Marise. "Especially *now*."

"Especially now? Explain, please."

"Now, when you've brought *that girl* out here, close to this house. You did bring her, didn't you? You asked me to be honest. Be honest yourself!"

"By my request she came."

"You paid for her to come?"

"Yes, I couldn't let her give up a good job in New York, even for awhile, and travel so far on my business, at her own expense—could I?"

"On your business?"

"Yes. I told you once that Miss Marks was an old friend. We've known each other for years. She used to live at Albuquerque. Cath and Bill, whom you met, are her cousins—or rather, Cath is. Mothereen is fond——"

"Ah, now I'm *sure* of something I only wondered about before!"

"Will you tell me what that is?"

"A note for Meesis Garth from the Hotel El Tovar," announced the voice of the half-breed maid.

"Bring it to me!" Marise ordered.

The girl, instinctively aware that she'd interrupted a "scene," tripped across the terrace with an apologetic air. Marise almost snatched an envelope from a little silver tray and tore it open. Her strong young eyes could just make out through the dusk a few lines of written words.

"This is from Zélie Marks!" she exclaimed, looking up at Garth. "She wants me to come over at once and see her at the hotel. She says she has been ill, and that's the reason she's staying on there."

"She tells the truth. She had appendicitis. They thought there'd have to be an operation, but they cured her up—or nearly—without. Why does she ask to see you?"

"She says she'll explain everything when I get there."

"Do you intend to go?"

"Yes. I'd like to hear—her story."

"All right—go. You shall have the car, of course. But there are a few things I'd prefer to tell you myself first."

"I'd rather hear everything from her."

Garth gave a shrug. "Very well. As you please. But you and she both seem to forget dinner-time. You'll be hungry if——"

"I won't be hungry!" cried Marise. "I want to start now."

"I'll see to it for you," said Garth, with that quiet, rather heavy air which irritated Marise sometimes and always puzzled her. For that was one of the things about him which upset her judgment of his character.

CHAPTER XXXVII

ZÉLIE GETS EVEN

WILL you step into Miss Marks's sitting-room? She's expecting you," Marise was greeted, arriving at the hotel.

"A private sitting-room! And Jack Garth's money pays for it," she thought dully. But of course it was nothing to her. At least, it would have been nothing if, while keeping it secret, he was not bent on driving away the man who loved her—Marise. Oh, and that reminded her of an important thing! It had been on her lips to accuse him of giving Zélie the jewels, but she had been interrupted, or had forgotten. Then the note had come from the hotel. . . . She would have the truth out of Zélie herself.

The sitting-room was on the ground floor, and had a loggia all its own, lit by a red-shaded electric lamp, like an illuminated poppy. Zélie was there in a huge American rocking-chair, gazing Canyonward under the moon, when Mrs. Garth was shown into the room. Instantly the girl jumped up, and Marise saw her framed in the door. She looked pale, and thinner than she had been in New York. But the change wasn't unbecoming.

The conventional thing would have been for Zélie to say, "How good of you to come! I hope you didn't mind my sending for you, as I've been ill." Whereupon Marise would naturally have answered, "Not at all."

But nothing of the kind happened. The two girls eyed each other like fencers, or even like cats. Then Marise said, "You see, I've come."

"Yes," replied Zélie, "I supposed you would, after what Lord Severance told me."

Marise was startled. "Lord Severance! *What* did he tell you?"

"That you suspected your husband and me of all sorts of unmentionable things, and that you wouldn't be satisfied until you'd had it out with me. Well—now you can have it out with me. Fire away, Mrs. Garth. I've nothing to be ashamed of. It's all the other way round."

"What do you mean?" gasped Marise.

"Well, frankly, I mean that you should be ashamed of suspecting him. You ought to know him better."

"I said not one word to Lord Severance about suspecting my—Major Garth," Marise broke out in self-defence.

"Didn't you?" echoed Zélie. "Well, that's funny, since he sent up his card and told me you were wild. He urged and urged, if I had any friendship for Jack Garth, to write and get you here."

"That's very strange," said Marise. "But I suppose—one must suppose!—he meant well. Now I am here, if you have anything to tell me you might as well tell it."

"Does Jack know you've come?" asked Zélie quietly.

"He does. We were talking about you when your note arrived. You see, Lord Severance mentioned that you were at the hotel."

"Then why did you want to talk with me? Surely you'd believe Jack? I shouldn't think *anyone* ever accused him of lying!"

"*I* never did! But I—well, when your note came I thought I'd rather hear everything from you. It wouldn't have occurred to me otherwise."

"You mean you wouldn't have proposed coming over here if I hadn't written?"

"I shouldn't even have thought of it."

"Then it's a game of Lord Severance's we seem to be playing."

"I don't see his object," puzzled Marise.

"Neither do I," replied Zélie—"yet. But as you say—now you are here, we might as well talk. Won't you sit down?"

"No, thank you," said Marise. "I'd rather stand."

"Well, if you don't mind, *I'll* sit. I'm not very strong yet, as I told you in my letter, that's why I'm still here."

"Oh, please do sit down!" cried Marise, more gently. "In that case I will sit, too."

"In justice to Jack I ought to tell you the whole story of why I came out," said Zélie. "He and I decided it would be best for you not to know. At least, *I* decided, because I'm a woman and realise how a woman feels about such things. However, as he let you come here to see me, he must have expected you to hear the truth. Goodness knows, it's simple enough, and won't take long in the telling! The morning after you were married he called early to see me, and asked if I'd do him a big favour. Of course I said yes. The favour was, to start out West at once, buy pretty things to decorate your room at Vision House, get the whole place in apple-pie order, and engage servants from somewhere—no matter where, and no matter what wages. Mothereen wasn't strong enough to have the whole work thrown on her shoulders, though she'd have

loved it. But when I'd finished a lot of commissions at Kansas City, I stopped at Albuquerque and told her about you."

"I wonder what you told?" Marise laughed a little nervously.

"What Jack would have wanted me to tell, not what you deserved."

Mrs. John Garth stiffened. "Are you the judge of what I deserve?"

"God help you if I were! All I know about you is, that you're the most spoiled, conceited girl I ever saw, and that you're not capable of appreciating Jack Garth —no, not *capable!*"

"You don't know in the least what I'm capable of!" The cheeks of Marise were burning now. They felt as if they had been slapped. "I never showed my real self to you. Why should I?"

"Why, indeed? But you showed me all your gladdest rags, and your jewels and newspaper notices, and let me answer lots of your love-letters, meaning to make the poor secretary envious."

"What horrid thoughts you had of me! I never meant that."

"Subconsciously, if not consciously, that's *just* what you did mean."

"I won't dispute with you, Miss Marks. But speaking of jewels—since you're being so frank—tell me if Major Garth didn't make a present to you of a rope of pearls, an emerald laurel wreath, a sapphire and diamond pendant——"

Zélie was strongly tempted to answer bluntly "Yes." If she did, and left it at that, Marise would be furious. She would go back to Vision House and quarrel with Jack, even if the two hadn't quarrelled irrevocably

already, and the divorce which might give Jack to her would come soon. But no, she had vowed to herself that she would be loyal to Jack through everything. She had vowed, too, that she would "get even" with Marise Sorel some day—and now was the day when she could "bring off the stunt," as she said to herself. But she wouldn't get even in a way to hurt Jack. If possible, she'd do it in a way to help him.

"He gave me those things to take out to Mothereen and ask her to keep them for you, till you came," lied Zélie. And lying, she looked more indignantly virtuous than when she had been telling the simple truth.

Marise believed her.

"Is there anything more you want to know?" inquired Miss Marks. "Because if you do, I can't think of much which would especially concern or interest you, except that Mothereen—Mrs. Mooney—came to the Grand Canyon with me and helped as much in the work as she was strong enough to do. So you needn't imagine she told you any fibs. If there were *reservations,* I'm responsible. She'd have blabbed out everything if I hadn't warned her you wouldn't be pleased to hear that I'd been Jack's chosen messenger. You didn't like me much, I said. You and your mother thought I was rather forward and above my place. You'd think so a heap more if you knew. Mothereen promised to hold her tongue. It must have been a struggle for her. She's as ingenuous as a child. So is Jack in some ways. He'd have told you all about me if I hadn't made him see it wouldn't do."

"You seem to have been awfully solicitous on my account," said Marise.

"It was on Jack's account really," explained Zélie.

"I didn't want his apple-cart to be upset—no matter

what I thought of the apples. I didn't care a hang for them personally."

Marise laughed. "The apples were me."

"That's it. Pretty, good-smelling apples, with pink cheeks and satin skin. But at heart—r-o-t-t-e-n!"

"Thanks!" choked Marise, and got up. "Thank you for *all* your frankness. I could return some of it, but you've been ill, and *I* don't like being rude. I must just say one thing, however, before I go. You've given yourself away dreadfully."

Zélie stumbled to her feet. "How?"

"By showing me exactly what your feeling is for Major Garth."

"I'm his pal from the beginning to the end."

Marise ignored the evasion. "You needn't be afraid that I'll be cad enough to go and tell him what I think about you. He probably knows your feelings and returns them, but——"

"He doesn't. Are you a *damn* fool, or are you only pretending?"

"I daresay I'm a damn fool," repeated Marise sweetly. "In any case, I'm not pretending."

"Then you're doubly a fool!" shrilled Zélie. "A damned fool not to know how Jack feels for you, and a damneder one not to know enough to feel right towards him. Jack's the salt of the earth. There's more courage and good faith and everything noble and big in his little finger than in your whole lovely body. So now you can go home. And put *that* in your pocket!"

Marise went. She shut the door softly, so softly and considerately that it hurt worse than a loud slam.

"I did get even with her!" Zélie thought. And plumped down on the sofa with a sob.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

WHEN SEVERANCE THREW DOWN THE KEY

NOT far from the door of Zélie Marks's room another door stood open. Marise would have whirled past it without noticing, had not her name been called.

She turned her head, with a slight start, and saw Severance.

"Come here a moment, my dear one," he said. "I have to speak to you."

Marise hesitated. Her brain was not clear. She felt dazed, as if Zélie had boxed her ears, as she had boxed Tony's earlier. She longed for sympathy. No one—not even Garth himself!—had ever been so horrid to her before, as Zélie had.

Severance took her hand and drew her gently over the threshold into a private sitting-room much like Miss Marks's. Then, when she was safely inside the room, he shut the door, locked it, and jerked out the key.

"Tony!" cried Marise. She felt as if some scene in one of her plays had come true. Except that—Tony wasn't the villain who locked the heroine in. *Surely* he wasn't the villain!

"This isn't the right time for a joke," she said.

"And this isn't a joke," said Severance.

"Well, unlock the door at once, please, and let me out," she insisted. "I must go——"

"Where must you go?" he asked.

"Where? Ho—back, of course."

"To Garth—after what happened between us three at his house this evening? It's impossible for you to go back to him, Marise. He can't expect it himself. When you came away to-night—if he knew you came—he must have known the whole thing was finished, the farce played out."

The girl felt as if a chilly breeze blew over her. She did not answer for a moment. She was wondering in an awed way if Tony were right. Was that the reason Garth had let her go so easily, to answer Zélie's note in person? But no. He had only just reminded her the moment before how he'd never intended giving her up to Severance. Still—when she thought of it—what *was* there to go back for, unless she intended to stay married to Garth—to be married to him as other women were married to their husbands?

She had never contemplated that, even at the times—and there had been times—when she'd admired Garth, admired him with a secret thrill. Besides, no matter how much Garth had wanted her, in the first throes of his infatuation, he didn't want her now—for good. Oh, such an end to the play wasn't to be dreamed of, from whichever side you looked at it!

"If I go away anywhere from Vision House, it will be to my mother," she said at last.

"Yes, of course. That's where I'm going to take you. We'll go to-night. There's a train we——"

"I can't possibly go with you!" she cried. "Don't you see, to do that would cause the very scandal we've all sacrificed so much to prevent?"

"I do see," said Tony. "But you said yourself to-day that 'everything had changed.' We don't need to be afraid of scandal any more. It can't hurt us now. It will do us good. Marise, I've been thinking things

over, and I believe that the only way we can get that brute to free you is by deliberately making a scandal. All the trouble comes from your throwing yourself at the fellow's head in such a hurry. If you'd waited, Œnone dying when she did would have made your marriage useless. You and I would both have been free——"

"We were both free before you decided you'd have to marry Œnone," broke in Marise.

"That was different. I was in debt and hadn't a penny to play with. I couldn't live on you. Now my debts are paid, and though they've not left me a very rich man, I've got something to go on with——"

"You have, because Jack Garth won't take your money."

"Oh, wouldn't he, if he could get it?"

"No!"

"Well, again, there'd be no question of money at present between him and me if you'd waited, and hadn't tangled yourself up in this beastly knot to spite me. Now I'll have to get you out of the tangle as best I can. You can't do it yourself, and Garth will hang on to you for the same motive you had—spite, if nothing more. Go with me to-night. Be brave. *Make* a scandal. Then for the sake of that mother of his—and for his pride if he has any, if not, for the appearance of it—he'll free you."

Marise was very pale. "A little while ago," she said, "you spoke of Zélie Marks being here to give—an excuse for divorce."

"Yes. That seems the likely thing. Garth probably arranged it when he expected money from me, to make divorce worth his while. Now we've had a row, more or less, and he knows that at best he can't get much.

His cry is 'all or nothing.' He won't use Miss Marks as a pretext."

"I tell you he never intended to accept money!" insisted Marise.

"That's a new opinion of yours, isn't it?"

"I never *felt* he would touch it. But I didn't know surely. Now I do."

"I wonder how?"

"I do—that's all."

"Well, by Jove; I never expected to hear you taking Garth's part against me!" Tony exploded.

"I'm not doing that," Marise said. "We've all been horrid and detestable in this business, you and I, and even poor Mums—for my sake——"

"What about Garth? Is he on a higher plane?"

"Yes, he *is*!" exclaimed the girl. "He loved me once. He wanted to marry me then—just for love. How he felt afterwards—or how he feels now—I don't know. But—he's not a *beast.*"

"And I am?"

"Oh, I put myself and Mums in the same box with you. I'm saying nothing of you I don't say of ourselves."

"Well, so be it!" said Severance. "I'm a beast, if you like, and you're the female of my kind. All the more reason why you belong to me. Nothing shall separate us again. Even if we can't marry——"

"Let me go out of this room!" the girl cried sharply.

"No! Your *mother* approved of my plan, I tell you, Marise. She saw it was the only way, for me to take you——"

"I don't believe it! There's not an unconventional drop of blood in Mums' veins. If she wanted me to be 'taken' anywhere, it would be to her. She would have

come to this hotel, and received me. Then, perhaps, I would have stayed—but not for you. I don't *love* you, Tony! I've discovered that. I wouldn't marry you if I could."

"You're out of your senses!" he cried. "You may think what you say at this minute, because you're angry. But your *heart's* mine. I won't let you go——"

"If you don't, I'll scream," threatened Marise. "Open that door at once, or I'll yell at the top of my lungs."

"I don't think you will," said Severance. "You don't like scenes, except on the stage. Besides, I don't care a damn if you do yell. It won't change things in the end."

The girl's answer was to lift her voice and shriek as only a trained actress can shriek.

Instantly, before she had reached her highest note, Garth stepped over the low window-sill.

"I was waiting for that," he said. "I knew you were here, Marise, so I lurked on the loggia. Unlock that door, Severance."

The other man was olive grey with rage and disappointment. It occurred to Marise that he looked seasick.

"Unlock the damned thing yourself!" he spat, and flung the key on the floor.

It landed near Garth's feet. But Garth did not stoop.

"Pick up the key," he said quietly.

"I'm damned if I will!" sputtered Severance.

"Not so many damns, please," said Garth. "They bore me." He took a Browning from his pocket and aimed it neatly at the centre of Severance's forehead. "Better pick up the key," he added.

Severance picked it up.

"Now unlock the door."

Severance unlocked it, and walked out into the hall. Then he slammed the door after him. Voices were heard.

"Somebody's come to inquire why somebody screamed," said Garth, pocketing the weapon again. "If they knock here, it's all right. Mr. and Mrs. Garth have a right to a *tête-à-tête* anywhere. I'll say you thought you saw a mouse. That'll settle their doubts forever."

But nobody knocked.

"Don't be afraid," Garth went on. "Even if you came in here because you wanted to come, I shan't make a row. But somehow I've got a 'hunch' that you didn't want to."

"I didn't," said Marise.

"He pulled you in?"

"Yes. I didn't think much of it at first. But——"

"Well, I don't believe he'll trouble you again. Not ever. I felt he might make a fool of himself to-night, though. So I came over, in case I should be needed. Now, what do you want to do—I mean, *really* want? I consider Severance wiped off the map—*your* map. So if you wish to be free of me, I'll make you so. While Severance was in the offing I'd have stuck to you like a leech, because you're too good for him. That Browning wasn't loaded. But I'd have killed the fellow sooner than give you up to him. It's different now. I'll take you to Los Angeles, to your mother at Bell Towers to-night if you like."

Marise was silent.

"You've only got to say," he prompted her.

To his intense surprise and her own, Marise began to

cry. Tears poured down her cheeks. She flung herself on a sofa and sobbed. "I'm so—so unhappy!"

Garth's face grew slowly red as he looked at her. "I'm sorry for that," he said. "Once I was willing you should be unhappy. I'm past that now. But you needn't be unhappy long. You don't even have to spend another night in Vision House. Your mother——"

"You want me to go," gulped Marise. "You really love Zélie Marks——"

"You're talking in your hat," he sharply cut her short. "You know I don't love Zélie Marks. What Severance said about her and me to-day was disgusting. She and I are friends. She's a good girl and a grand pal. I wouldn't hurt her even for you. And I tell you this, Marise, now that I know—for I do know!—that you won't marry that cad Severance, you can divorce me. But it will have to be done decently. You can go to Reno and live there for a few months with Mrs. Sorel. Then you can free yourself on the grounds that our tempers are incompatible. But no woman's to be lugged in, even a stranger. I won't stand for that. For the sake of Mothereen and my Victoria Cross I won't be dragged in the dirt. I'll not give you what the lawyers call 'cause.' So there you are. Now you know."

But Marise still sobbed. "I don't—don't wish to drag anyone in the dust!" she wailed.

"I'm sure you don't," said Garth, in an impersonal tone, a tone of kind encouragement. "You've changed quite a lot since New York, though the time's been short. You can't measure these things by time! I *hoped* you'd change. You were an adorable girl, but I told you once that you were spoiled and selfish, and you were —all of that. You weren't a woman. Now you are. I counted a bit on the effect of Mothereen. And I counted

a whole lot on the Canyon. They've both worked their spells more or less, I shouldn't wonder. But you haven't changed to *me*. Not that I ever really dared expect that. But I sort of *hoped*—at first. I'm not blaming you, though. I took the risk—and let you take it. Now for the next thing."

"Now for—the next thing!" repeated Marise, between sobs; and searched wildly in her gold-mesh bag. "For Heaven's sake lend me a handkerchief," she wept.

Garth lent it, a linen one, not scented as Severance's handkerchief would have been, but fresh and clean-smelling.

"We're still in that cad's room," Garth said, looking round with a frown. "But he won't bother us. And we'd better thrash things out, now we're about it. We must decide where you're to go. You know, Marise, I'm on long leave. I never quite made up my mind whether to go back to my regiment, or chuck the army for good, and stay over here. I thought some day I'd hear a clear call, one way or the other, while there was time to decide. And I knew Mothereen wouldn't long be far off from me, whatever I did. But now I leave it to you to settle the matter for me. I expect I owe you that, for all my sulkiness. If you want to live over on this side, I'll go back to England—my father's country. If you'd like to take up your career there again, rather than you should risk running up against me all the time, I'll resign my commission—as Severance and a lot of fellows like him hoped they could make me do!—settle down in Arizona and—forget the war."

"Forget me, you mean!" said Marise.

His tone changed, and he spoke in a lower voice. "I don't expect ever to forget you, Marise."

"But you'd like to!"

"I'm not so sure of that, in spite of all."

"You will be, when you marry Zélie Marks."

"Zélie Marks again!"

"Or somebody else."

"I shall never marry, Marise. That's as certain as that I'm alive. I haven't any love to give another woman after you. You had it every bit. But that's not an interesting subject to you, is it? Can you make up your mind to-night and answer my question? Shall it be England for you and America for me, or—*vice versa?*"

"You *liked* the army, didn't you? You didn't want to give it up."

"I wasn't going to be driven out by Severance and Co. I shouldn't mind so much going of my own accord."

"Wouldn't you like to stay in the Guards for some years anyhow, and reap the reward of what you've done? —coming over here to Vision House now and then on leave, till you're ready to rest and settle down for good?"

"Sounds pretty ideal, as you put it. But I'll be content enough either way. It's for you to decide for me, as things stand. But oh, by the by, I forgot! I'm really rather a rich man, Marise. I've made my fortune three times over, and I've got umpteen thousands more than I need for myself or Mothereen. I want you to have alimony——"

"Oh no!" she exclaimed. "I'm rich too—quite rich enough."

"But I *wish* you to take something of mine, don't you understand? And money's the only thing I have that you could possibly care to have."

Marise began to cry again, twice as hard as before.

"There is—something else of yours I'd care to have," she choked, "if—if it isn't too late."

"It's never too late."

"But you don't know what I mean."

"No. Not yet——"

"I mean—your *love*. You said—I'd killed it."

Garth took one step from the middle of the little sitting-room to the sofa, and sat down beside the girl. He crowded her as Severance had done that afternoon, but she didn't move an inch.

"I didn't say that!" He spoke the words in her hair—that silky hair which had seemed too divine to touch. "I asked you how much you thought it took to kill love. But nothing could kill mine for you. Nothing on earth or in hell. And I *have* been in hell, Marise."

"Come to heaven with me, then," she whispered, and clasped his neck with both her young arms. Her cheek, wet with tears, was pressed against his.

"You—*mean* it?" he stammered.

"Yes—yes. I *love* you! Because—you're so *queer*, you made me, somehow. I know now I never really loved anyone but you. And I never will if—you *care!*"

"Care? I'm in heaven already." He framed her face in his hands and kissed her on the lips, a long, long kiss that made up for everything.

"In heaven?" she murmured. "So am I. But it will be better at Vision House. *Dear* Vision House. Dear *home!*"

Garth sprang up, bringing her with him, his arm round her waist.

"Let's go now!" he said.

THE END